

WALT WHITMAN'S CHANGING PERCEPTIONS  
OF THE EFFECTS OF THE AMERICAN  
CIVIL WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON  
HIS POETRY

By

Andrew Percy

Matthew W. Guy  
Assistant Professor of English  
(Chair)

Rebecca Jones  
Assistant Professor of English  
(Committee Member)

Christopher J. Stuart  
UC Foundation Associate Professor of English  
(Committee Member)

Jeff Elwell  
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

A. Jerald Ainsworth  
Dean of the Graduate School

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the University of  
Tennessee at Chattanooga in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree of  
Master's of English

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Chattanooga, Tennessee

August 2013

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the way that Walt Whitman's perceptions about the American Civil War changed in *Drum-Taps*, his book of poems written about the war. The book attempts to capture the emotions of the Northern public throughout the war, without discussing any easily recognizable event of the war, thus creating an emotional record of it. The opening poems are jingoistic, declaring the justness of the war and the hope that it will be over soon with minimal casualties, but about midway through the tone of his poetry shifts into one of cautious optimism. After the shift Whitman's loyalties to the Union are still very apparent, but he has begun to emphasize the toll that the war has taken both on citizens and soldiers as a way to remind the public of what they have been fighting for.

## DEDICATION

The author would like to dedicate this work to his wonderful fiancée Gretchen Bunde, who has been an invaluable source of patience, help, and advice. He would also like to dedicate this to his parents, who may not have always understood this work but always supported it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank his committee, Dr. Matthew Guy, Dr. Rebecca Jones, and Dr. Christopher Stuart for all of their help and support throughout this long process. He truly could not have done this without their helpful comments and the pushes in the right direction. He would also like to thank Gretchen Bunde for her help in proofreading numerous drafts and being a sounding board for far too many ideas, as well as Robert Baker and Andrew Nist for sending him research material and critiquing his ideas.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In his autobiography *Specimen Days*, Walt Whitman sums up what he believes to be the total cost of the American Civil War, and the picture he paints is not pretty, littered as it is with gruesome facts and figures designed to illustrate the horrors of this event:

The dead in this war—there they lie, strewing the fields and woods and valleys and battle-fields of the south . . . (the estimate of the War department is 25,000 national soldiers kill'd in battle and never buried at all, 5,000 drown'd—15,000 inhumed by strangers, or on the march in haste, in hitherto unfound localities—2,000 graves cover'd by sand and mud by Mississippi freshets, 3,000 carried away by caving in of banks, &c.,) . . . the numberless battles, camps, hospitals, everywhere—the crop reap'd by the mighty reapers, typhoid, dysentery, inflammations—and blackest and loathesomest of all, the dead and living burial-pits, the prison-pens of Andersonville, Salisbury, Belle-Isle &c., . . . the dead, the dead, the dead—*our* dead. (776-7)

These scenes graphically illustrate the horrors of the American Civil War, a conflict that, if these numbers are any indication, had a profound impact on the nation as a whole. Whitman was certainly involved with the war by frequently visiting the hospitals in Washington D.C., so while he may not have seen action he was well acquainted with its consequences. These visits profoundly changed the way he viewed the war and its outcome, and this change is evident within his poetry about the war, entitled *Drum Taps*. Within this work Whitman's attitude and approach to the war change dramatically as the book, and the war, progresses. He begins this work with an optimistic outlook of the war, firmly believing that it would all be over soon, but as the death toll starts to rise, he regrets championing a war that ended so many lives, even though

he remains firmly committed to the cause that the North was defending. Whitman is far from an isolated case, however, because much of what he feels and writes about is an attempt to chronicle the emotions that the American people at large were feeling. Whitman's nationalistic views regarding the importance of democracy and his dedication to the survival of America are two subjects that are very important to him, because these views allowed him to remain loyal to America even after witnessing the terrible acts committed in its defense. Whitman chose not to date any of the poems in this work, but it is easy to trace the course of the war through their themes, and not just because of this shift. Before this discussion can go any further, a brief discussion about the history of the war must be made because it will help clarify the terms that will be used throughout this paper when it comes to placing a poem in its proper historical context. These terms refer to the general breakdown of this complex conflict which can be hard to understand both historically and politically.

The war lasted from April 1861 until April 1865, but the events that led directly to the war can be tied best to 1860, and the political ramifications of the war were not fully resolved until several years afterward; therefore, there is roughly five years of division and uncertainty for an enterprising writer to draw inspiration from. The war itself was a very long, drawn out affair with battles all over the southeastern United States and odd forays into the Midwest and Northeast, requiring a certain amount of generalization when creating and explaining these divisions and why they were so influential. The war years can be divided into three major categories, so while a particular poem is undated, it can be tied to one of these divisions: The Early War, The Middle War, and The Late War. The Early War is best described as 1861 and 1862; this period was incredibly turbulent because despite the Union's best efforts with victories at Shiloh and Antietam, the Confederacy actively won major victories at Fort Sumter, Manassas



and Fredericksburg, three battles that Whitman notes in both his poetry and his autobiography. During this period, the outcome was far from certain, but most approached it with the firm belief that their chosen side would win because each side had scored some major victories. This belief informs Whitman's guarded optimism and disregard for the human cost of the war, because if victory is all but assured, then the cost does not really matter since it will be relatively low. The Middle War, in which this shift in Whitman's views will occur, is best described as the entirety of 1863, in which the outcome is truly undecided because of major Confederate victories at Chancellorsville and Chickamauga and a major Union victory at Gettysburg that changed the course of the war. Throughout this period, it is obvious that the Union will likely win the war, but that it would be a very difficult task that would involve more men and material than ever before, and even then, each side held on to the hope of victory. The sudden expectation of massive casualties greatly dismayed much of the populace, because the understanding that victory would be swift and painless was completely gone, replaced by the knowledge that victory would come at a high cost if the casualty rates from the year's campaigns were any indication. At this point of the war, Whitman's disillusionment sets in, because he has now been fully exposed to the wounded veterans and has come to appreciate their sacrifice, and he knows that the horrible scenes he has already witnessed are about to multiply exponentially. The Late War, in which a third of Whitman's poems are set, lasts from 1864 until the end of 1865, because even though most hostilities had ended by April of 1865, a small number of Confederate forces were still actively fighting the Union. The Late War saw the end of the Confederacy's chances of independence, but they did not go down without a fight. In the brutal battles of The Wilderness, Franklin, Petersburg, and numerous others, the Confederates made it clear that even though the war was winding down, they would not stop until all hope was lost. For the Union, the end was

in sight and victory was all but assured, and Whitman certainly recognizes that in his poetry, because even though the tone remains bitter, the outlook is still positive in the end.

During this time these battles were major news stories, and their coverage in the media was such that no one could have missed a single gory detail, especially when the public believed each battle to be the decisive one. Whitman's actions during this time are well documented by historians and his own writings, which allows for a very clear picture of how his views and opinions could have been influenced by these events. He never served in any branch of the military during the war, but he was in constant contact with veterans because of his service in the hospitals around Washington D.C., which served as the de facto hospitals for wounded Union soldiers and Confederate prisoners of war for every major engagement in the Eastern theater, a general designation which encompasses any battle fought around the Atlantic coast and nearby inland areas. This allowed Whitman to gain a firsthand look at the effects of war, as well as allowing him the opportunity to learn about the daily life of the average soldier. Whitman entered the hospitals after the battle of Fredericksburg in search of his brother during the winter of 1862-63, at which point Whitman's political views began to change. He had heard that his brother was wounded in the battle and went looking for him in the hospitals where he was first acquainted with the grisly aftermath of battle. His brother survived the battle unharmed, but Whitman was profoundly moved by the suffering he saw and felt compelled to help. Not every writer or intellectual saw this side of the war quite like Whitman did, but they largely agreed with his notion that the Union was worth saving. While they certainly agreed with his views on America, most of the Northern writers viewed the war in a much different fashion. Before any discussion on how these views diverged, it must be said that the views these writers had about America and its value were held only by Northern intellectuals, because when the country split,

so did the intellectual community. This is not to say that all Southern intellectuals were for secession; in fact, the Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens was vehemently opposed to it on principle, signing on to the idea only when Georgia asked him to represent their interests, but a large number of them saw America as having failed. Whitman and the Northern intellectuals were staunchly opposed to this idea, but just like with the Southern intellectuals, this group also has a few exceptions. During the war solidarity was important, but there were always dissenters and a number of Northern intellectuals sympathized with the Confederacy. These were few and far between, but a lot of ink was spilled over the slavery question because not only was it a major cause of the war—it was a pressing problem for Union troops who found themselves in possession of runaway slaves. Several Northern intellectuals attacked the institution outright like James Russell Lowell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and William Lloyd Garrison, but some had mixed feelings about it, especially when it came down to using violence to bring it to an end. Whitman could not be included on this list because he fell between both camps on the slavery issue. He believed in it as long as allowing its continued existence kept America together; when it failed, he turned his back on it, but not with the vigor shown by Lowell or Emerson. For Whitman slavery was a non-issue, so none of his Early War poems even mention it, and only one Late War poem does. This conflicting view shows his dedication to America at all costs, because he was willing to allow slavery to continue until its existence drove America apart.

Whitman was not alone in this belief, Herman Melville also subscribed to this ideology although with a slight twist. Melville was not a letter writer or a frequent publisher, making his political views hard to find or even understand, but like Whitman tried to document the war through poetry in *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*. Melville included a brief afterword to

this book as a way to explain his views about the war and to make sure that his poems were interpreted correctly. This must be taken with a grain of salt as it is a post-war document, but it does explain Melville's political ideology, especially when it comes to the slavery issue: "It was in subservience to the slave-interest that Secession was plotted; but it was under the plea, plausibly urged, that certain inestimable rights guaranteed by the Constitution were directly menaced, that the people of the South were cajoled into revolution" (240). Melville argues that while the political turmoil may have been started by the slave-issue, it was the belief that the federal government was infringing on the rights of states that really started the war. Melville neither condones or condemns slavery, but by using the phrase "plausibly urged," he makes it sound like it was a non-issue for him, although he did have problems with the way the federal government handled the situation. Melville does not dwell on this problem long though, he spends the rest of the essay talking about how the defeated South should be treated, but by talking about the political turmoil of the time, he bears a strong relationship to Whitman.

Whitman's political views are very complex and change over time just like everyone else's, but his handling of the political turmoil of the pre-war period is important. Whitman also believed in the clear division of power between the states and the federal government, while placing the blame firmly on the slaveholders for leading the people astray. Like Melville, Whitman does not have a problem with slavery, but he does with the institution as he mentions in one of his political tracts: "[I]f . . . the entrance and establishment of slave labor through the continent is secured, there will steadily wheel into this Union . . . slave state after slave state, the entire surface of the land owned by great proprietors . . . showing no more sight for free races of farmers and work-people than there is now in any European despotism or aristocracy" (1316). Whitman wants to prevent any more slave states from entering the Union, not because he hates

the practice, but because he is afraid that by allowing slavery to prosper free men will then be enslaved by the “great proprietors” who own all of America. Whitman has no problem with the slave states already in existence, he just has a problem with the possibility that more could enter. This pre-war belief is only part of a much greater ideology that was developed by Whitman, one that always placed America first, especially when it came to safeguarding the American ideal. He wants America to remain free and open to all free Americans, and by avoiding endorsing the abolition of slavery, Whitman stresses the importance of American unity, much like Melville did. Unity, or Unionism, is one of the central tenets of Whitman’s ideology, one that helped him to understand and accept the great loss of life that accompanied the war, a loss that he witnessed firsthand in the hospitals.

Whitman firmly believed in a united America, even if it meant allowing a disgusting practice to continue. No matter how conflicted a modern audience may feel about this view, it shows the lengths Whitman was willing to go to maintain his faith in America, and it is this faith that saves him from becoming completely disillusioned about the war when it became apparent that it was going to continue. His opening poems, such as “First O Songs for a Prelude” and “Eighteen Sixty-One,” make clear references to the optimism held by both sides in the early war, when they both believed that a quick victory was possible, and this belief and the battles it caused became poetic ammunition.

In the opening poems of *Drum Taps*, Whitman has a very patriotic, idealistic tone which clearly conveys to the reader that not only is this war necessary, but that human lives are a small price to pay to ensure the continuation of America. He acknowledges that war has a price attached to it, but for him, this cost is secondary to the protection of the Union, a cause that he was incredibly passionate about. Whitman’s passion is evident in poems like “Rise O Days from

Your Fathomless Deep,” “Song of the Banner at Daybreak,” and “From Paumanok Starting I Fly like a Bird,” each of which glorify both the war and America while stressing how important each is. However, there is a sudden shift about halfway through the book when it becomes obvious that Whitman regrets his earlier dismissal of these costs, and following his own experiences writing letters home for wounded soldiers, this tipping point takes the form of a poem about a family receiving a letter that their only son will not come home from the war entitled “Come Up From The Fields Father.” After this point, the tone in this work shifts dramatically to one of a gritty, disillusioned realism which still believes that the war was just, but that also fully recognizes the immense costs attached and wishes to remind the audience that their freedom is not free. This kind of disillusionment appears in poems like “Vigil Strange I kept on the Field One Night,” “Long, Too Long America,” and “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice,” poems that stressed the tragic loss of young soldiers, while reminding the reader what they have died for. However, Whitman does not become fully disillusioned because he recognizes the value of the war as it protects his sacred Union from dissolution. Suddenly the poems feature much more broken characters and are full of tragedy, rather than the ebullient celebration of justice that appeared in the early poems. There is a distinct difference in the way Whitman portrays these views, however, and they can be broken up into three different categories: the autobiographical, the military, and the civilian views.

The autobiographical poems examine Whitman’s own beliefs as he speaks to the reader about his own role in the war as chronicler and nurse. Two poems in particular address these views: “First O Songs For A Prelude,” the opening poem in this work, expresses a boundless optimism as to the justness of the war; while “The Wound-Dresser” marks the profound shift in tone as the narrator expresses his regret about championing the cause of this war because of the

broken men that he has had to treat. The military view expresses more of the same, although it contains actual characters through which these ideas are further reinforced in a much more subtle fashion. “An Army Corps on the March” features a vast army on the move; described as invincible by the author, they overcome any obstacle that is placed in their way on their inexorable march to victory. Whitman departs from this theme in “I Saw Old General at Bay,” where suddenly this grand force is reduced to a small regiment besieged on all sides and taking heavy losses, a tragic reversal of fortune. The civilian view is much more detailed than the military view, because it shows not just how involved the citizenry must become, but also how devastating that involvement can be by exploring the rampant nationalism that caused a lot of men to enlist in “Beat! Beat! Drums!,” a poem which sees domestic scenes interrupted by their major players departing for war. Whitman then turns to how this departure devastated the families of soldiers who would not come home in “Come Up From The Fields Father,” a poem about a family receiving the terrible news that their son will not come home. By examining these three sets of poems it is possible to see a pattern in the way that Whitman viewed the war, in that there is a distinct shift in the way he viewed the costs of this conflict as it dragged on for longer and longer periods of time.

This approach is relatively new as no other major critic has really discussed this approach at length, but most of them have addressed particular issues that are very relevant to this discussion. Scholarship on the Civil War focuses largely on two things: the physical war, as in the battles, generals, and politicians, and the literature of the period. The literary studies about this time period are always comprehensive and rarely examine a single author and their effect on the war or how the war has affected them. Most studies look at groups of authors in order to comment on how they viewed the war or what they were doing, but when it comes to studying

single authors the war becomes a footnote or a single chapter. Granted, five years is a small part of some of these author's lives, but frequently they are passed over or excluded because for many authors of the time they simply did not publish anything noteworthy enough to become a landmark work. Whitman's Civil War writings unfortunately are rarely treated on their own and yet always manage to appear in major studies as a chapter or two, creating a critical gap that must be addressed. When Whitman's Civil War writings are covered on their own, his changing ideals are either omitted or taken for granted. Of the major studies of this time period, none of them has examined Whitman either by himself or at length, and while they certainly make some good points and draw some good conclusions, they either omit or do not take into account the fact that Whitman's views about the war fundamentally changed after he began serving in the hospitals.

The first of these major studies is entitled *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* by Daniel Aaron. In his introduction, Aaron makes the purpose of this work clear when he writes that: "the paucity of 'epics' and 'masterpieces' is no index of the impact of the War on American writers. As I shall seek to show, the War more than casually touched and engaged a number of writers, and its literary reverberations are felt to this day" (xix). In this work, he tries to show how the war was, and continues to be, portrayed in literature, allowing him to take the long view, which presents some problems. He breaks the book up into seven parts, with each part examining a different group of writers and briefly surveying their work, beginning with authors who covered the beginning, those who took a philosophical view of the war, those who participated in or lived through it, those who grew up during and just after the war, Southern writers who participated, and finally those who try to reconstruct it in the present. It is a very comprehensive list that makes a lot of distinctions between authors, with Whitman



being placed solidly within the philosophical category. In this section, Aaron quotes heavily from Whitman's personal correspondence and his autobiography, along with some very brief quotations of his poetry, in an attempt to show how Whitman viewed the war and its related issues. If anything, this is more of a character sketch and a biography than a critical analysis of his work, but it does yield some insight into Whitman's views. Aaron makes it very clear that Whitman was a staunch Unionist and disliked anything that threatened the Union or that would upset the delicate balance of power that allowed slavery to remain in check, but he also hated politics of all kinds which is why he was so friendly towards the rebel soldiers he encountered in the hospitals and why it is difficult to discern the political sympathies of some of his characters. Aaron mentions the definite shift in the tone of Whitman's poetry from very patriotic to much more reserved, but he does not analyze any poems themselves to prove this point and only lists the titles of a few poems for future reference. Despite this omission, Aaron contributes to the conversation by providing an excellent glimpse into the complexities of Whitman's beliefs about many of the major issues surrounding the war.

The next major study is more focused and provides a clearer understanding of the material. In her book *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861-1865*, Alice Fahs examines the popular literature of that era and explicitly says in her introduction that: "Popular war literature also adds an important chapter to cultural histories of the war that have focused primarily on elites, canonical writers, and Northern and Southern intellectuals" (2-3). To fulfill the basic premise of her study, she finds more obscure authors and works in order to provide a fuller understanding of how they also shaped public opinion along with the more recognizable authors of the time. Fahs has certainly done her homework because she does not focus just on the works, but on why they were influential by including large sections

on the state of printing presses, their influence, and their popularity. She looks at everything thematically rather than by authors, as opposed to Aaron, with chapters devoted to sentimental literature, histories, children's literature, how the race issue was dealt with, women's literature, newspapers, and even a section about comedy. It is a very detailed study that tries to cover everything, but it frequently becomes more sociological analysis than literary analysis; regardless, it is very comprehensive and manages to resurrect quite a few authors from the dustbin of history. Fahs sticks very closely to the premise of her book by covering the lesser-known authors, but she makes a special exception for Whitman. She examines several of his poems for their sentimental portrayal of soldiers, but never at length in that they are quoted, discussed for two or three sentences, and then she is on to the next poem, a necessity for such a broad study. While her discussion of Whitman improves upon the one offered by Aaron, her coverage still shows that a gap in the scholarship exists because she prefers to treat this shift in ideas as a given, that all of Whitman is sentimental and full of regret, rather than it having developed over the course of the war. Fahs contributes significantly to the conversation by giving minor authors serious critical consideration, while at the same time examining a major component of Whitman's war poetry.

Randall Fuller steps in to fill that gap with his book entitled *From Battlefields Rising: How The Civil War Transformed American Literature* by examining the major authors of this period and how the war influenced their views and works. Fuller writes in his introduction that: "This, then, is a story of America's greatest writers as they struggled to make sense of the Civil War in old and new literary forms and to uphold their highest ideals, whether for the preservation of the Union or for the emancipation of the slaves or for the simple dignity of human life" (9). Fuller examines each author's experiences to see how their views changed and influenced their works, taking the broader approach used by Aaron but, instead of devoting chapters to

individuals, uses the same style as Fahs by mixing authors up together and telling it chronologically. He places each author in their proper context beginning before the war and ending with the end of the war, thus allowing the audience to experience the war as the authors did by explaining why certain poems were written at certain times or why an event would play such a large role in the creative process. Because everything is broken up chronologically, no section is really devoted to an author, although they might be dominated by one. Like Aaron, Fuller deals with Whitman at length, although his approach is very different. Fuller discusses Whitman's sentimental poetry but places it into a cultural context that does provide some insight into why he chose certain images, especially the hospital scenes. Once again this view is treated as a given, because although Fuller explains why the hospital scenes for Whitman were so poignant and why they would have deeply affected a reader of the time, he does not explain the shift in Whitman's poetry. All he sees is an historical note on why these images were so moving, rather than explaining why the inclusion of such images is a radical departure from the tone of the earlier poems. The analysis of this one aspect is very well done, but it omits the progression of the war as the reason why such depressing images appear in the work of a poet known for celebrating life. Despite this omission, Fuller's coverage of the intellectual side of the war is very detailed and shows how these different authors approached the war, a critical part of any conversation about this period.

The next important piece of criticism is a reevaluation of Whitman's war poetry that appeared in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*: "Drum-Taps: Revision and Reconciliation" by Cristanne Miller. Miller examines *Drum-Taps* not just as a work of literature, but as a historical artifact by examining its content and its publication history. Over time Whitman edited the volume to be less nostalgic and more conciliatory, as in he tried to downplay the patriotic

elements in his work in favor of promoting reconciliation between the two former enemies. In doing so, Whitman reordered his poems to give his shorter, more generalized poems a prominent place because they spoke to both factions. This fits with the idea of Whitman's shifting beliefs by directly acknowledging that over time his concept of America changed from unabashed patriotism to a more reserved form of patriotism. Miller excels at analyzing these facts but likes to look at the overall view, not just the individual poems, leaving room for a later, more in depth discussion.

The last major work of criticism is entitled *To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave: American Poetry and the Civil War* by Faith Barrett. Barrett takes a very different approach to literature and the Civil War than Aaron, Fahs, and Fuller but still contains elements from all three. As she states in her introduction: "How did Civil War-era poets create for themselves a rhetorical platform from which they could address their immediate circle of family and friends, and the nations of the Confederacy, the Union, and the United States? How did their poetry respond to the ways that the war destabilized the constructs of 'family,' 'community,' and 'nation'?" (2). This is essentially her thesis and the entire premise for this work as she tries to examine the poetry of the war rhetorically rather than historically, something that none of the other authors have done. She also makes a point in her introduction that she wants to try to cover a broad range of poets by combining the approaches of Fahs and Fuller with a mixture of major and minor poets. Thankfully, she provides a very succinct breakdown of what she will cover in each of her chapters, so it was easy to trace her overarching argument through each one. Like Aaron, Barrett devotes a chapter to each specific poet or grouping of poets, with a chapter that features Whitman. Barrett explains this when she notes that her "fourth chapter examines the poetry of Emily Dickinson, using parallel readings of her canonical counterpart, Walt Whitman, to

contextualize an analysis of her address to the nation. . . . I argue that she alternates between skeptical and patriotic nationalist stances in her wartime work” (14-5). Whitman is not the main focus of Barrett’s argument in this chapter, but she does explain how exactly he addresses the nation in his poetry, a critical reading that does not appear in any other work. This view in some ways fits in well with what this paper will try to bring to the discussion, although it will deal with Whitman in greater depth. While how he addresses the reader is certainly important, his message is much more important, and Barrett omits that. Her focus is on how he presents himself to and addresses the reader, but not necessarily on his message, because she treats the war as a single, prolonged entity for which one view is more than sufficient. In other words, Barrett assumes that Whitman’s views do not change because his style does not change. Whitman is only a supporting figure in this chapter, as Dickinson is the main focus, so this omission is understandable because it would have engendered a much longer, more unwieldy argument. She brings a fresh perspective to this discussion by mixing the approaches of Aaron, Fahs, and Fuller with her own methodology to critically examine the rhetoric within the poetry of this period, but even this still does not fill the critical gap. By using the work of these critics, it is possible to help bridge the gap left by the question of how Whitman viewed the human cost of the war, a bridge that will be constructed using the three parts discussed above: the autobiographical poems, the war poems, and the civilian poems, each of which create a strong argument that a sudden, devastating shift occurred within the war poetry of Walt Whitman.

## CHAPTER II

### THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Walt Whitman viewed the cost of the Civil War to be profoundly immense in terms of the lives sacrificed to ensure the continuity of America, but throughout his shift from jingoistic optimist to depressing pessimist, he never once criticizes the Union. This fact, coupled with his extensive essays about democracy and the spirit of America, play a major role in why this shift does not swing into full disillusionment. However, it must be said that these writings are all from the post war period and are, to a certain extent, a retrospective of past politics to prove the greatness of America, but nevertheless they do contain some insight into Whitman's unshaken faith in America. As this analysis progresses, quotes from these writings will be necessary to illustrate this fact as to why his dire assessment of the war situation does not go farther than it does. Much of Whitman's work can be considered autobiographical or tinged with some basis in fact, but two poems in particular stand out because they can be readily connected with Whitman's life and illustrate how he progressed from merely acknowledging the cost of war to fully understanding it.

#### Whitman's Early War Attitudes

In the poem "The Wound-Dresser," found in the Mid-war poems, Whitman writes that "Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and / urge relentless war" (Stanza 1. Lines 5-6). This quote sums up the entire tone of the first part of *Drum-Taps* and is the greatest

explanation of how Whitman viewed the coming of the war. This spirit finds its way into much of the early poetry, including the three early poems that will be analyzed throughout this paper, but only one of those three can be considered truly autobiographical. “First O Songs For A Prelude” opens this work and sets the tone for the first half by expressing the jingoistic tone of the early war while acknowledging that some sacrifices will be made. As a whole, it can definitely be termed a celebration of the dominant American spirit, but despite all of that it provides a clear view of how Whitman viewed the war, and, by extension, how he viewed America. This view of America is extremely important because, as noted above, it influences every poem. Cristanne Miller notes the importance of this opening when she writes that: “Whitman eschews the discourse of enemies . . . alludes only in abstract terms to the war's causes or goals, and never mentions who is fighting or even who wins the war. But he communicates an openly partisan . . . repeatedly . . . The opening poems declare allegiance to the North unapologetically, and other poems later repeat these calls to battle” (1). Whitman’s lack of dialogue with the suddenly hostile Southerners is important to this poem as he focuses only on the North’s reaction, but most importantly, he omits any real discussion about the causes of war thus underpinning his jingoism.

“First O Songs For A Prelude” extensively catalogues the sights and sounds of a nation going to war, all within the microcosm of Whitman’s own Manhattan. He documents this flurry of activity within his autobiography, a chapter that provides a great deal of insight into how Whitman’s personal views are reflected in this poem because many of the scenes he describes have real life counterparts. Unfortunately, a full comparison of the accuracy of these scenes falls outside of the question of the way he saw the early war unfold before him, but a few quotes may be necessary to explain a few very enigmatic images that appear near the end of this poem. The

opening lines go a long way to setting the tone as they describe an almost casual optimism for what is to come: “FIRST O songs for a prelude, / Lightly strike on the stretch’d tympanum pride and joy in / my city” (1-3). Whitman is clearly discussing the pride he feels in his city and the joy at something great that has occurred: “How she led the rest to arms, how she gave the cue, / How at once with lithe limbs unwaiting a moment she sprang” (4-5). The war has already begun, and Whitman is overjoyed at what has transpired so far because his city will fight for its beliefs. The shift from peace to war was clearly a sudden one with no hesitation in Whitman’s view of the early war. In his mind, it is an open and shut case that does not need any hesitation or doubt because something terrible has transpired that requires an immediate reaction. He does not elaborate on this terrible act, with only a few lines meant to serve that purpose appearing further down, but as Whitman expresses this very positive view of the war, he begins cataloguing the shift that has occurred from a peaceful prewar existence to that of a nation at war and in the process exposes to the reader his true thoughts about the war. These thoughts speak volumes about the way he saw the war and directly contribute to the optimistic tone evident in this poem: “O superb! O Manhattan, my own, my peerless! / O strongest you in the hour of danger, in crisis! O truer / than steel!” (6-8). Replace the word “Manhattan” with “America,” and the true meaning of the poem becomes clear. Although on the surface Whitman writes about his city’s reaction to the war, by reading “Manhattan” as “America” the reader is presented with a strong, “peerless” nation that can handle any crisis, a view held by many Americans as their country was about to go to war with itself because they needed their country to repay violence for violence to ensure their survival. The lengths that Whitman was willing to go to preserve the Union have already been made clear, but here it shows how that applies to any threat to the stability of the Union. In his mind, they are stronger than any opponent and can face any challenge, and his remark about



“truer than steel” is very telling. Their steel weapons will give out before their beliefs in the truth will, and this resolve permeates the rest of the poem. The truth they are adhering to is the truth of Unionism, the idea of America’s superiority, and the way he phrases the event that caused this reaction is a direct reflection of this truth.

The lines that convey this trouble are very brief and leave much to the imagination, but they do serve to chronicle this new struggle by personifying the city-state as a mother and the citizens as her children:

Sleepless amid her ships, her houses, her incalculable wealth,  
With her million children around her, suddenly,  
At dead of night, at news from the south,  
Incens’d struck with clinch’d hand the pavement. (19-22)

This is all of the explanation that Whitman gives as to why the nation found itself at war, but it does provide a very accurate portrait of prewar America. In Whitman’s mind, America is restless and active, ready for anything, but it is more than that. America is prosperous by his own account, with ships, houses, wealth, and lots of citizens. Prewar America sounds like a great place to live, because there is no hint of strife in it at all until the third line changes everything. An educated reader would rightly guess that that event is the Confederate army shelling Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina as the Union army attempted to resupply the fort. These are certainly the opening shots of the war, but far from its real cause. In the mind of Whitman, though, this is certainly the event that caused the war, as his autobiography makes explicitly clear in a chapter containing almost exactly the same scene (706). Still, these lines portray the imminent threat to America’s prosperity and unity, two things that Whitman is passionate about. The modern reader might wonder why this threat remains vague and the cause of the war shadowy, but at that time, elaboration was not necessary because everyone knew what that “news from the south” was because it marked the beginning of a war that would soon change America forever. That phrase

alone speaks volumes about Whitman's America. As a Unionist he would repudiate any attempt to separate from America and would certainly refuse to admit that a new nation had formed in the southern states. For him America was America, and no act of aggression or secession would change that. If everyone agreed with this view, then the war would not have happened as it would have been a non-issue.

After this brief explanation of the war, Whitman moves right in to cataloguing the massive response to this incident by describing the kind of men who began to volunteer for the Union army. His list is incredibly comprehensive in that he manages to cover almost all walks of life, and this section highlights how disruptive the war will be as well. In the midst of all of the cataloguing, a brief nod towards the cost of war is made, so brief that unless the reader was looking for it they would miss it entirely:

The tearful parting, the mother kisses her son, the son kisses  
his mother,  
(Loth is the mother to part, yet not a word does she speak  
to detain him,). (57-60)

Suddenly, the cost of war has been made real for the reader, because here is a mother sending her son off to war and an uncertain future, but this image implies something very important about Whitman's outlook. This image in and of itself is a very common one and is familiar to most readers, but the way Whitman frames the image says a lot. The mother, despite her apprehensions, lets her son go off to war and does not dissuade him from this course of action, tacitly implying that she approves of the war and its stated aim of preserving the Union even if it does mean the death of her son. If Whitman had framed this scene as a mother begging her son not to go, then it could be read as his own disapproval of the war, poetic license or not. These few lines symbolize another facet of the early war experience as well when they are placed in context. The lines above them are filled with a cavalcade of images of ordinary citizens

preparing for war, with lines like, “The mechanics arming, (the trowel, the jack-plane, the / blacksmith’s hammer, tost aside with precipitation)” and “The salesman leaving the store, the boss, the book-keeper, / porter, all leaving” (31-2, 37-8). Each of these images show regular people arming themselves in preparation for the war to come, with lines covering almost every profession just to emphasize the sheer size of the army that is forming. However, each of these figures leaves his life behind without a second thought or goodbye to his loved ones. Whitman emphasizes not just the universal nature of this conflict, but the shared belief in this cause and the way that it seems to cross all social lines. No obstacle hinders their leaving and it seems to be so confident of the future, so Whitman must temper this ever so slightly with these few lines describing an occasion where one man could have been stopped.

As quickly as it appeared, this image is swallowed up by the enthusiasm for this new war, because the following lines obliterate the somber pall that has been cast over the poem as Whitman describes a military parade:

The tumultuous escort, the ranks of policemen preceding,  
clearing the way,  
The unpent enthusiasm, the wild cheers of the crowd for  
their favorites. (61-4)

These lines immediately follow the somber scene of the son leaving his mother, and it becomes evident that while not everyone may feel sorrow at the parting of their loved ones, most are excited about the prospect of the upcoming war, especially if a military parade is swarmed by spectators eager to see a spectacle unlike any they had ever seen before. Optimism runs rampant in these lines, and the thought of any misadventure is completely banished from this poem, at least in the mind of the crowd. The emotion had to be contagious, for the crowd likely felt what the soldiers did; even if Whitman does not clearly state what the soldiers themselves actually thought, he does summarize the general atmosphere of this time a little later. For the moment, a

brief excerpt from his autobiography might be useful in showing how this enthusiasm affected the people around Whitman and the way that they saw the war. He describes several companies of men from Brooklyn coming to the armory and signing up for thirty days service in the army. This fact in and of itself, the ability to ask and receive a commission for thirty days, shows exactly how much faith the populace put into their troops and what exactly they expected. They clearly expected the war to last only a month, if that, because of the superiority of their cause; else, why would they do something equally audacious: “[They] were all provided with pieces of rope, conspicuously tied to their musket-barrels, with which to bring back each man a prisoner from the audacious South, to be led in a noose, on our men’s early and triumphant return!” (707-8). Victory was clearly a foregone conclusion, and to think it was possible to bring a captive home in a noose is just presumptuous, but this is exactly the kind of optimistic air that Whitman is trying to imbue into this poem.

So far he has only mentioned what the war might bring one time, and then in a covert way, but he does make one other reference to what might happen. Not long after he presents the scene of the military parade, he goes back to cataloguing the different preparations that are being undertaken in order to make this war a successful one, and once again his thorough detailing makes it clear just how different things are going to be. In the midst of detailed passages about artillery and their sheer destructive power, he makes a few curious nods towards the outcome of combat:

(Silent cannons, soon to cease your silence,  
Soon unlimber’d to begin the red business;)   
All the mutter of preparation, all the determin’d arming,  
The hospital service, the lint, bandages and medicines,  
The women volunteering for nurses, the work begun for in  
earnest, no mere parade now. (67-72)

Any war is bound to have casualties, and they must have somewhere to go, and while Whitman may not yet know of his service at a hospital, he acknowledges their purpose even if his description is slightly vague. He phrases it so that the hospitals are completely ready for action, but the earnest attitude of the volunteers is misleading. To begin with, a hospital volunteer may actually be excited at the prospect of helping the cause by ensuring the troops stay healthy, but to remain earnest after the outbreak of war is very difficult. Whitman will catalogue these difficulties in “The Wound-Dresser,” but for now it is clear that the war has not yet really begun for Whitman. He acknowledges that casualties will happen, but for his nurses to remain “in earnest” says that they are not really busy, and for a war to have begun while the nurses stay idle, well, that suggests the invincibility and superiority of their cause. Their soldiers are superior because their cause is superior: this is the message that this poem sends to the reader. Whitman is also sure to note that peace is certainly over, because of his insistence that the “silent cannons” will not be silent for much longer. This phrasing suggests a delay between the action and the reaction, although in all fairness they have not reached the enemy yet. One thing in particular stands out about these lines, the so called “red business” of the cannons. Most readers would skip over this phrase and see it only as a continuation of a description, unmindful of the dual purpose that it serves. Looking at its placement within the phrase automatically reveals the most obvious interpretation: it simply portrays the flames pouring out of the barrel as it fires. This interpretation is fine as it reiterates the lethal seriousness of the situation that America has found itself in. However, when it is looked at as an extension of the next line about the hospitals, another meaning becomes clear: it portrays the lethal business of killing soldiers who seek to harm the Union. Whitman fully acknowledges that with war will come a human cost, but he so far has not fully elaborated on the cost, or even the extent to which he believes it will go to attain

victory. He has completely bought into the idea of a quick war in which casualties will be low, a fact which leads to some very interesting places poetically.

As this poem comes to a close, two images really stand out as being perfect examples of this optimism that overrides all reason in the way that each welcomes the war with open arms. The first example appears just after the description of the women volunteering to be nurses. The scene has suddenly shifted, and it is as if Whitman personally addresses not just his northern audience, but the rebellious Confederacy as well:

War! an arm'd race is advancing! the welcome for battle, no  
turning away;  
War! be it weeks, months, or years, an arm'd race is  
advancing to welcome it. (73-6)

The people welcome the war with open arms in these lines, and it is difficult to interpret them to be anything other than jingoistic. Whitman so far has completely acknowledged that war has been thrust upon them, and now that it is here, refuses to back down; in his mind it must end with their victory. His use of the word “race” here is striking because it implies not just a military response but a cultural one, as if in his mind this is a war between one culture and another. The “race” that he champions here does not shrink away from the challenge; it accepts it, but this acceptance will certainly come with a price, which is where the phrase “no turning away” comes into play. In one sense it certainly means that not only has the challenge been accepted, but that it will not reconsider or rethink its decision, they are fully resolved to see this thing through. All of this sounds fine because the reader likes to think of their country as committed, until the secondary meaning of this seemingly innocent phrase kicks in. What this phrase really suggests, especially once the next line of “be it weeks, months, or years” is added, is that cost is not an issue. Time does not matter because in the end they will win; their victory is certain. As time does not matter neither does manpower, and since the whole race is involved they apparently

have a steady stream of men to spend as well. The human cost in this war seemingly does not concern Whitman in these lines as they suggest an almost casual remark about the outcome of this war. He can be so casual about the outcome because of the absolute certainty he feels at this point that the Union will win.

The last image occurs in the last few lines of the poem as Whitman brings this jingoistic work to a close. After a last paean to the artillery that will soon be unleashed upon the rebel forces, he stops and summarizes the exact attitude that he has been trying to get across to the reader the entire time, and it leaves the reader with a somewhat optimistic, and slightly terrifying, view of a city about to go to war:

And you lady of ships, you Mannahatta,  
Old matron of this proud, friendly, turbulent city  
Often in peace and wealth you were pensive or covertly  
frown'd amid all your children,  
But now you smile with joy exulting old Mannahatta. (85-9)

Once again, the metaphor has shifted and the city of Manhattan is now a woman again, exulting over the new found state of war that has begun. The interpretation of these lines seems fairly straightforward, but they reveal an interesting array of facts about Whitman and his views on the beginnings of the war. On one level it can be read as being solely about Manhattan, but on another Manhattan could just be standing in for America as a whole. As it stands, the reader is presented with an image of an active, bustling trade city, but once Mannahatta is replaced with America, an image of a vibrant yet troubled nation appears. The ships denote commerce, trade, and wealth, a prosperous antebellum society who may have had some troubles, but remained largely undisturbed. The troubles it has to deal with are implied in the phrase “Often in peace and wealth you were *pensive or covertly frown'd*” (emphasis added). In this antebellum era of prosperity, things were not as idyllic as they appeared, else why would this city be pensive, or

worse yet, frowning? The issues that this antebellum society might have faced are not enumerated in this poem and must be left strictly to the imagination. In fact, Whitman does not elaborate on this subject anywhere, except for a few brief paragraphs in several essays railing against politicians. Despite this lack of information, a few things can be inferred from this strange phrasing. To begin with, the problem must have been viewed as relatively minor, as in it was something that was more annoying than anything. It could be managed, but not dealt with, just like the issue of slavery. The other thing is that it implies a certain sense of uncertainty about the future, as if the situations that were developing might not be the best thing for America, hence the word “pensive.” Numerous situations cropped up in the years and decades before the war, enough to keep people guessing as to what the future might hold. One thing is clear, though; the war will have changed everything, because whatever troubles the country might have had or been having are about to be solved in one brutal conflict. Whitman makes it clear that the city, and America, are fully cognizant of this resolution and are happy that this will be the outcome: a war that will apparently know no bounds socially, militarily, or culturally. Every effort will be made to ensure victory because it is already a foregone conclusion, otherwise why would a nation be happy that a civil war has begun? It is clear that the city is pleased that a response has been issued, but based on the previous lines, it is also certain of victory. Whitman makes it clear in this poem that this war will cross all social boundaries by cataloging recruits from almost every profession, and he has shown that their entire culture is behind them, but most importantly he has shown that they are willing to do whatever it takes for however long it takes to end this war. This view of the early war emphasizes the hope for a glorious victory and the enthusiasm of a nation that is about to undergo a major trial.



## The War Gets Real

The zeal that Whitman has for the cause of the Union is clear; otherwise he would not have so strongly supported the outbreak of war, but as time passed that view changed, as it did for so many Americans. As noted above, there are no dates on any of these poems, but it is clear that “The Wound-Dresser” must be dated after his entry into the hospitals because many of the details and scenes he describes are so brutally honest and true to life. In the previous poem Whitman sought to capture the jingoistic essence of a nation going to war with itself without a hint of regret or remorse for what they were about to do. Nowhere in that poem does he attempt to dissuade his audience from the course that that nation was taking, but in this poem set after his entrance into this gruesome occupation the tone is very, very different. It is a very reflective poem, somewhere between a meditation and a confession, because it looks back at the narrator’s life in order to tell the stories of the true cost of war with no detail spared. The framing of this particular poem reveals a more pessimistic view as Whitman sets up the story, his story, as a foreshadowing of what will happen in decades to come:

AN old man bending I come among new faces,  
Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,  
Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that  
love me,  
...  
Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these  
chances,  
Of unsurpass’d heroes. (1.1-12)

The poem takes place in the future, as the old man handles the requests by children and young people to talk about his experiences in the war. This is a fairly common request of any veteran as people who were not there want to know every little detail due to some sort of morbid curiosity, and Whitman creates an almost stock response to the request that shocks the reader because of its brutal honesty. He does not place exactly how far into the future this poem is set, but it is clearly

far enough along that the young men and women have no real first- or secondhand knowledge of the war because neither they nor their parents were around to experience its hardships. Another reason is purely regional: unlike the South, where practically every county had a battle or three and every family experienced major tragedy as war ravaged their land, the North only had two real battles on its soil, and despite the vast numbers of soldiers it threw into the meat grinder of combat, not every family experienced real tragedy. This is the audience that Whitman writes for and the point he attempts to get across: do not forget these sacrifices. He makes this clear in his summary quoted at the beginning of the discussion of "First O Songs For A Prelude." That was a brief taste of a much more poignant passage that highlights not just the human cost physically, but also emotionally:

Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and  
urge relentless war,  
But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I  
resign'd myself,  
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch  
the dead. (5-10)

The enthusiasm in the earlier poem is completely gone, and the poet who celebrated the triumph of the early war has retired in seeming defeat. He realizes that his place is not to champion the war, but to become an active participant in it the only way he knows how. These lines provide a contrast between the two poems, one that shows just how much Whitman has changed. In the previous poem, references to the casualties of war were slight, with only a few lines total to suggest this outcome, and even then they are offhand remarks rather than a direct address of this possibility. Whitman also places them near the end of the poem, almost as an afterthought, because it is foolhardy to glorify war without at least acknowledging in some small way the sacrifices that will be made. Here, however, a different poet emerges, one who not only acknowledges this cost, but one who places it in the forefront of his poetry. Whitman does not

try to sugarcoat this scene; instead, he lays it out there for all to see that he has been tending the dead and wounded that he helped to make by urging “relentless war.” These lines also strengthen Whitman’s position as storyteller as Faith Barrett notes: “Whitman roots the authority of his speaker in his direct contact with soldiers through his work in the military hospitals” (186). From this position of authority Whitman is able to construct much stronger poems and arguments because he has come into contact with these soldiers. In the early war Whitman had no contact with these men, so he was able to write whatever he wanted about them as he had no point of reference. After working in these places and meeting actual soldiers, Whitman had to change, because these men showed him what real patriotism was, and this influenced the rest of his poetry.

Not only has this aspect of his poetry changed, but Whitman also makes a startling admission, one the early war poet would not have been caught dead making. After he talks about the “unsurpass’d heroes,” Whitman adds another phrase to the end, and with the new phrase in mind the shift that has occurred becomes clearer than ever: “[W]as one side so brave? the other was / equally brave” (1.12-3). It is a simple question with a simple answer, and one that is easy to miss because it is only made up of two lines, but its implications are major. In the early war Whitman describes the Union army as invincible, guaranteed victory no matter the odds because of the justness of their cause, but here he treats both sides as equals, an unthinkable act for someone so pro-Union. He has attributed to the enemy a quality which he has so far reserved for his own army, and it shows that his passions have been tempered by time and circumstance. Whitman tries to convey this same feeling to the people who beg him for stories, who he assumes must feel strongly pro-Union, as anyone who grew up in a postwar society would, especially if they have had no contact with the older generation who fought in the war and for

whom secession is no longer an option. That is the crux of this statement: they were our enemies, but we must respect them because no matter what sacrifices we made, they have made equally important sacrifices in pursuit of their misguided cause. For Whitman to voluntarily make this kind of statement suggests a major shift in thinking, because the enemy is no longer the enemy, just another unfortunate group of people affected by war.

The war has become a tragedy for everyone, and Whitman tries his hardest to convey that to his audience in a way that they can understand, and this attempt to make it relevant allows him to ask the audience a question, something that he has never done before, which allows the reader to connect more fully with the tragedy that he writes about. This particular question appears at the end of the first stanza, immediately after making the statement that both armies were equals in bravery: “What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics, / Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what / deepest remains?” (16-8). This question can be interpreted in two different, yet valid, ways wholly dependent upon the perspective of the reader. Already it has been suggested that this is a question from Whitman to the audience, asking them what tragedy has stuck with them over time, wholly influencing their character. If the reader firmly believes that it is up to them to answer, they become connected with this poem on another level. They are allowed to sympathize with the pain of the narrator as they fully understand why these memories, even after so many years, are still painful to discuss despite the need to make sure that these sacrifices are remembered. By asking this question, Whitman has ensured that his audience is now more receptive to his message of remembrance, because they too understand why these memories remain. This interpretation allows the reader to remain fully in the role of spectator, but the other interpretation forces the reader to take a much more active role. They take on this active role by making the assumption that they are the ones asking Whitman what

tragedies have stayed with him “latest and deepest.” Asking this question allows Whitman to answer it fully, creating an opportunity for a longer narrative which sweeps away any notions about the glories of war. The question is phrased in such a way that either interpretation could be right, but to continue exploring the second option reveals more of Whitman’s change in focus. It specifically asks “what stays with you latest and deepest,” as in not what happened, but what did you do? It then lists off three types of combat: “curious panics,” “hard-fought engagements,” and “sieges tremendous,” each of which denotes several important things based solely on its wording. By using words like “curious,” “hard-fought” and “tremendous,” the questioner only wants to know the good stuff, the action packed war story, not the minute details of camp life or mind numbing marches in search of the enemy. All they want to know about are the battles. In all fairness, that is still what people want to hear about in terms of the Civil War. In the introduction when the differing periods of the war were laid out, each one had a list of major battles attached to make it easier to figure out what was happening when, and the ones listed are only a fraction of a much longer list of known battles. People want to remember the big things, the important things, not necessarily the small, gory things which constitute so much of war. Whitman was guilty of this in the first poem, but in this one he seeks to rectify that situation by putting the gory details in front and by destroying the notion inherent in the question that combat is glorious.

The next three stanzas complete this picture of a war stripped of its glamorous reputation, and they do so in a very graphic way. Whitman has already acknowledged the human cost and what it has done to him, but now he tries to tell the reader exactly what his experiences were without attempting to spare them the gory details. In the second stanza he provides the audience with another jarring contrast by picturing a battle in which he successfully charges and captures the enemy’s earthworks, then describing how he helped in the aftermath:

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,  
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,  
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,  
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,  
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd  
hospital,  
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return  
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do  
I miss,  
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,  
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and  
fill'd again. (2.22-33)

In this long passage, a few things stand out: the graphic depiction of numerous beds full of wounded soldiers, the description of the attendant and his ghastly burden, and the portrayal of the hospitals. To begin with, Whitman only implies the number of soldiers needing treatment, but it is definitely a lot larger than anyone could have expected based on the previous poem. The hospital scene depicted there showed a well-run, well organized hospital that could seemingly handle anything that was thrown at it, but now a much different scene is unfolding. There are so many injured men that they are literally lying on the ground waiting for help which the narrator tries to provide. In doing so, he uses a peculiar phrase: “their priceless blood reddens the grass.” Earlier when he was describing both armies as brave, it would have been easy to interpret that to mean that he has lost faith in his cause since he is willing to put them on the same level, but this phrase negates that interpretation by telling the audience that his cause is still just as important as ever. This importance stems from the word “priceless,” because when it is added, a scene about a bunch of wounded soldiers takes on a whole new meaning. Because of Whitman’s avowed Unionism, it is easy to classify these soldiers as being Union troops, especially given the word “priceless,” but a field hospital was set up for anyone who needed medical attention, whether they were Union or Confederate. With this fact in mind, along with the previous statement about bravery, this scene takes on another context altogether. Nowhere in this passage, or really

anywhere in this poem, does Whitman identify these soldiers as being either Union or Confederate, so when he uses the term “priceless,” he refers to the fact that they were willing to sacrifice everything for their respective causes. This picture is in line with Whitman’s own experiences, as he notes numerous times in his autobiography that he helped soldiers of both sides with basic tasks and treated them as equals. He has clearly turned from celebrating the war and victorious Union, to celebrating, or perhaps eulogizing is a better term, the common soldier.

Whitman uses the graphic details of the attendant’s duties to create an interesting figure in this gruesome spectacle. Just like with the wounded soldiers, the attendant’s job is very different from the one described in the original hospital scene. Gone is the clean and orderly attendant, fully prepared for anything, for here we see a dirty attendant whose only job is to collect filthy bandages and take care of spilled blood. He is an enigmatic figure in this poem because Whitman never mentions him again in greater detail, but his is the worst job and one can only imagine how terrible it must be. The most disturbing thing about him is the last two words that describe his burden: “fill’d again.” This is not a pretty picture, but one that repulses the reader because it implies the brutality and human cost of this conflict in a way that no battle scene ever could. These soldiers are suffering, and it is this man’s job to take away the discarded dressings and clean up the messes left by the wounded and dying, and “fill’d again” implies that this is an ongoing job, one that cannot be complete as more and more injured are brought in. The clean and sanitary hospital must be maintained by someone, and it is clearly the attendant’s job whether he likes it or not. Through this, Whitman emphasizes not just the sacrifices made by the soldiers, but by the civilians who must care for the men fighting on their behalf.

The last notable thing about this passage is its description of the hospitals because it gives the reader a significant amount of information about them. The wounded are described as going

to three places: a field, a tent hospital, and a “roof’d hospital,” with each denoting not just the kind of building but the kind of battle that just finished. For soldiers to have to wait in a field for medical attention, it implies that a major battle has just finished and due to the high numbers of casualties, the regular hospital and the field hospital are so full that they cannot take any more men in until they have finished treating those inside. It also shows the variety of places that a soldier had to go to in order to receive any kind of medical attention, because there were not always what would be considered a regular hospital. In his autobiography Whitman gives numerous descriptions of the hospitals he worked at or visited, and the ones in the poem are all representative of that experience. One hospital that he worked in stands out because it is a perfect example of how strange the hospital system was at the time. In one entry of his autobiography, Whitman describes in immense detail the hospital that had been set up inside of the Patent Office in Washington D.C. because there was a shortage of beds in actual hospitals (717). This brief anecdote shows not just how overwhelmed the hospital system at the time was, but how normal it would be for men to receive treatment in the most unusual places.

As ghastly as this scene is, Whitman is not through driving the point home about how terrible the conditions of war really are in direct contrast to the popular conception of war. As the second stanza closes, he makes a statement that immediately humanizes himself and the soldier he is talking to because it creates a burden that is certainly difficult to bear, both for him and the audience: “Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if / that would save you” (2.39-40). Whitman does not wish to trade places with this soldier; instead, he wishes that he could trade his life for that of this soldier that he does not know. He feels this immense debt to the soldiers who have literally given everything in defense of the country that he loves, one that he does not know how to repay beyond trying to bring some comfort to them. He wants to repay



this debt, even if it means dying himself. Because he is telling a story to an audience, this line might make them a little uncomfortable, due to the fact that their ideal war has just disappeared, leaving behind this gritty, realistic picture of a filthy, overcrowded hospital, and their heroic narrator who seemed like the perfect patriot has become someone who has openly questioned whether his service is even comparable to these brave men. This is the crux of this statement, asking whether or not he deserves their sacrifice. The value of the war or their cause is not in question; Whitman is only trying to make the point that their sacrifice is so complete, that there is nothing that should not be done to help the men fighting for their freedom. Once this statement has been made, everything that follows after proves its inherent truth as Whitman describes gory scene after gory scene, with one notable example. This appears right after Whitman asks the audience to think about how they would repay the debt, with him describing a very grisly hospital scene:

On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)  
The crush'd head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the  
bandage away,)  
The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and  
through I examine,  
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet  
Life struggles hard,  
(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!  
In mercy come quickly!). (3.1-9)

Suddenly the war is made very, very real for the audience. Until now it has been covered in a roundabout way, with no real characters in terms of actual injured soldiers, but now two different men are introduced, and their identities, and their presentation, are key to understanding their inclusion at this moment. The identity of the first man is difficult to determine given that Whitman gives no other attribute besides his wound, but it is likely that he was either an infantryman or an artilleryman, but given his condition, there was probably no way for him to be

identified positively either way. His injuries are horrendous; he probably does not have long to live due to the head injury, and he is described as “crazed.” The cavalryman is a little easier to identify because his branch is identified immediately, although he also does not seem long for this world. With him, Whitman forces the audience to listen to his wheezing, labored breaths, but he makes sure to note just how desperately this man clings to life even though death is near. These characters are stand-ins, representatives of the common hospital experience because they could be anyone, and that is Whitman’s point. Their suffering is not limited to them, but to every person who has come in contact with them, which is why Whitman includes the prayer for death at the end. Whitman feels like these men have given enough, enough so that they should not suffer any more, but yet they hang on anyway, and it is this kind of tender request that separates Whitman from the antiwar camp. If he had belonged there, his request would not have been phrased in such a compassionate outpouring of emotion indicative of someone who really cares for these soldiers and their cause. This compassion leads directly into the presentation of this scene. As noted above, it appears right after his plea to trade places with the dying soldier, which forces the audience to consider the price of their cause by seeing the kinds of deaths soldiers were actually dying—not just glorious battlefield deaths but ignoble deaths in crowded hospitals. This is the reality of war that Whitman wants to shock his audience with because he has already lost faith in the idealistic war so prevalent in his early poetry. The other thing to note about his presentation is the pacing of this scene. The first line is “On, on I go,” implying that he is hurrying to visit every patient in the huge wards discussed earlier in this poem. Keeping this fact in mind, it becomes clear why so little information is gathered about the first soldier, and the second soldier receives the death prayer—namely, that the narrator, Whitman, does not have time to stop and catch their names because he has so many other soldiers to help, and the lack of

information creates a sense of rushed time in the mind of the reader. The last thing about this presentation is actually cultural, because for Whitman to present a scene like this was unheard of at the time, as Fahs notes: “For . . . Whitman, it was a cultural affront that wartime death occurred outside the framework of sentimental norms that emphasized a tender, emotive parting from family and friends” (98). In American culture at the time, the fact that two unknown men were dying in a cramped field hospital shattered notions of the noble death, and this contributed to Whitman’s own shift in how he understood the war, and he wanted his audience to feel the same sense of outrage that he did.

Overall, these two poems are representative of a much larger pattern within the Civil War poetry of Walt Whitman, except they take on a much more autobiographical bent than the others do. This pattern is understandable as he begins the war without any real contact with the war, and without this contact he is able to develop his own jingoistic views, only for them to radically change after he comes into contact with the injured soldiers. For Whitman, as it was for so many others alive during this turbulent time, the war produced a rollercoaster of emotions, as certain victory turned into possible victory, and as a quick war with low casualties turned into a long war with massive casualties. Whitman tried his best to chart these feelings the only way he knew how—through poetry and prose. Although he did not experience the war firsthand, these poems seem so true to life because they reflect the emotional side of the war—they represent the war from an outsider’s perspective, someone who lived through the war, was impacted by the war in a very tangible way, and yet never saw actual combat. However, these two poems do not present a full picture of Whitman’s changing views, which is why his other poems must be examined as well, especially the ones dealing with combat and regular civilian life.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE WAR POEMS

As noted above, Whitman never saw actual combat, but he was in contact with the men who did because of his job in the hospitals and presence in the capitol. In several places throughout his autobiography, Whitman writes about his interactions with different soldiers, often providing miniature biographies of each man as he records his story. One exchange in particular from his early excursions highlights the kind of war narrative that Whitman likes to relate because he always emphasizes the humanity of the subject and the sacrifices they have made:

Here is a case of a soldier I found among the crowded cots in the Patent-office. He likes to have some one to talk to, and we will listen to him. He got badly hit in his leg and side at Fredericksburgh that eventful Saturday, 13th of December. He lay the succeeding two days and nights helpless on the field, between the city and those grim terraces of batteries; his company and regiment had been compell'd to leave him to his fate. To make matters worse, it happen'd he lay with his head slightly down hill, and could not help himself. At the end of some fifty hours he was brought off, with other wounded, under a flag of truce. (715)

The case of this unknown soldier is typical of Whitman's narrative style when talking about the wounded men, but it also represents the kind of stories that he was hearing from them about what the war was really like. It is easy to see how hearing an unbelievable story like this could profoundly change the way the cost of war was tallied. This change has already been charted in the autobiographical poems, but another large component of *Drum Taps* is the war poems, poems which feature soldiers and combat. These also experience a major shift in their own right as

Whitman becomes acquainted with soldiers who have actually lived what he is writing about—and this acquaintance utterly changes his views about the war. Two poems in particular clearly exhibit this shift. The first is entitled “An Army Corps on the March,” a brief poem from the early war period that features an invincible army that is always moving towards victory. The second is called “I Saw Old General at Bay,” another brief poem that features a beleaguered army on the verge of collapse. These two poems create an interesting dichotomy that highlights just how profoundly Whitman was influenced by his time with the soldiers.

### This Will Be Over Quick

There are numerous illustrations within Whitman that show a seemingly invincible army; in fact, one of them, “First O Songs For A Prelude,” has already been discussed, but that particular poem mixed its metaphors and cannot rightly be called a military poem although it is featured prominently. “An Army Corps on the March” fits the bill perfectly because, despite its length, Whitman manages to perfectly capture the vibrant nature of an army going off to war for the first time. The optimism that led to the 13th Brooklyn tying nooses to their rifles is evident in this poem, and it informs the reader precisely what they should expect from this new army.

The title of this poem is slightly misleading to the reader, because what is expected is a description of an army marching towards a possible battle, with combat a remote but ever-present possibility. Instead the reader receives an army marching into a battle, and the setup of this scene is immediate and striking: “WITH its cloud of skirmishers in advance, / With now the sound of a single shot snapping like a whip, / and now an irregular volley” (1-3). Just like the skirmishers suddenly find themselves under fire, so does the reader who is now confronted by a battle. Whitman does not emphasize any individual soldiers; instead, he emphasizes the

experience of combat by allowing the reader to picture the beginnings of combat, but this is the only mention of actual combat in this entire poem. The details he chose to include in these opening lines are also telling, in that he does not picture any deaths, although if there are gunshots there must be enemy troops nearby, so for this to be their only mention is odd. Nowhere else in this poem does Whitman mention the enemy, and given the descriptions of the army to follow, it means the battle must have been brief. The word choice is also worth noting, particularly his choice of the word “cloud” to describe the skirmishers. When using this word to describe a group of soldiers who are at the absolute head of a column of troops on this march, this word takes on two separate meanings that tell the reader a lot of information about the army and their situation. The first interpretation is fairly straightforward and one that most readers would automatically assume—that a “cloud of skirmishers” denotes a large number of men at the front, probably in expectation of battle. However, it also suggests a literal cloud formation wherein soldiers spread out to cover more ground, also in expectation of combat, because more room means more maneuverability. Given the following lines, the first interpretation is more likely, or at least more impressive: “The swarming ranks press on and on, the dense brigades / press on” (4-5). The army that Whitman describes is massive, large enough that the words “swarming” and “dense” have to be used in order to get across the size of this army. For an army on the march, “swarming,” although an apt civilian description of ongoing action, is never a good phrase to use because of what it suggests. It suggests wild, uncontrollable action as the soldiers press forward, but for this time period everything was strictly regulated, even on the march as Bruce Catton notes: “The processes of nineteenth-century warfare were as intricate as the weapons themselves were simple. A regiment of infantry consisted of ten companies. With much training, these ten could be taught the ballet-dance movements by which the regiment

could maneuver as a unit rather than as a loose aggregation of semi-independent commands” (43). This provides some idea of how complex moving a large number of troops could be, because they had to move as a single unit—otherwise they would descend into chaos. The army of that time had no sophisticated communications equipment, and the best way to make sure they were where they were supposed to be was to just stay together. A “swarm” implies a disorganized mass of men, when in reality they would be the farthest thing from it, especially if they were on the march. Combat obviously makes things more difficult, but these were the expectations that officers had of the men in their command. “Dense” is the best description of how tightly packed these men really were in order to maintain proper formation, as well as adequately conveying their numbers. The last noteworthy part of this brief quote is the repetition of the word “on.” If it was used one time, the audience would still get the sense of forward movement, but without the effect added by repeating it. By repeating it, Whitman creates this image of an unstoppable army that is always moving despite its size and the gunfire that appears in the opening lines. The repetition drives home the point that the army will stop for nothing, and possibly stop at nothing, to achieve its objectives. It does not even pause for the “irregular volley” that has happened ahead of it; instead it is dealt with quickly so as not to impede progress. Whitman does not repeat the gunfire of the opening anywhere else in the poem, and that fact coupled with this repetition shows fairly well exactly how Whitman viewed the early war: a brief conflict that will be easily quelled.

He further develops this notion throughout the rest of this poem, continuing with the next two lines: “Glittering dimly, toiling under the sun—the dust cover’d men, / In columns rise and fall to the undulations of the ground” (6-7). Suddenly, a clearer view of the men is available, and the audience sees a very different army than the one pictured in opening poems. The soldiers

have been humanized again, and their description suggests several things to the reader. To begin with, the dust that covers them is completely normal and something to be expected of marching through the great outdoors down dusty roads, but if they are covered in dust, then so are their uniforms. In the bright, clean atmosphere in the opening poem a dusty uniform seems unlikely since they have not actually seen combat, but now the war has begun in earnest, and the army has had to get its hands dirty. Not only are the men dirty, but the seemingly easy task of conquering has become much harder as evidenced by the word “toiling,” which suggests hard labor.

Marching in tight formation under sporadic fire certainly is not easy, and Whitman tries to get this point across without compromising the conqueror image that he has been developing. By using the word “toiling” he manages to accomplish this by humanizing the men and showing that it is not easy, as well as bringing some realism into this poem. However, he keeps the realism to a minimum, because “toiling under the sun” is bound to produce complaints from the men who could be tired, hungry, thirsty, or even sick. By denying this part of the human experience, Whitman furthers the idea of an invincible army, one that does not get tired and can seemingly move effortlessly through gunfire. The preceding phrase, “glittering dimly,” is a huge part of the army’s description and a clue to the meaning of the poem. The army is marching in broad daylight, allowing the sun to reflect off of the many bright surfaces of the different parts of the typical soldier’s uniform, particularly his rifle. Although many of the surfaces are still bright, they are covered in dust, which tells the reader one very important thing: that they are experienced. Their uniforms are not bright and clean, something which indicates inexperience with the field, instead they are dirty from use in defense of their country. This leads to a hint of the greater meaning of the poem. It is difficult in a time of war to remain free from mistakes and costly errors, and in the early war there were plenty on both sides, but hope remained, even if it



was slightly tarnished. This hope of a great victory, tarnished by the mistakes and tragedy of war, is the central meaning of this poem, because even though the men are “toiling” and covered in dust, they keep moving on.

The last image of this quote reinforces that by describing the way that their columns march. Whitman describes it as rising and falling “to the undulations of the ground.” On the surface, this is a pretty fair assessment of how a column on the move marches, especially in an age where dirt roads were common, as well as adding a needed touch of realism to this poem. It stresses to the reader the conditions under which these men serve their country—not only is it hot and dusty, but they have to march over uneven ground, a simple task for a loose, disorganized unit, but for a tight column that has to move as one, a nearly impossible one. As noted above, some of these details are left out in a bit of poetic license, but the fact remains that this is a fair rendering of a typical scene. However, as noted above, it helps define the greater meaning of this early war poem. It is easy to skip over this line and dismiss it as a bit of unnecessary background, but it does serve a purpose. The column keeps marching despite the uneven terrain, proving that it is no obstacle, but the way that Whitman describes the terrain is where the hidden meaning appears. When describing uneven terrain, Whitman could have chosen from any number of words to adequately describe it, words such as sloping, rocky, marshy, overgrown, etc. Instead of using any of these, he uses “rise and fall,” words that not only reference the movement of marching troops as their feet rise and fall, but which also reference the way their line moves crossing the uneven terrain, rising with hills and falling with valleys. A third interpretation adds onto the earlier interpretation of the tarnishing effect of war, in which the “rise and fall” are literally that of the army’s fortunes, rising with every victory and falling with every defeat and setback. It would be easy to make this a negative image because the army is already tarnished

with dust, but instead it remains wholly positive because they are able to keep moving no matter the obstacles. Clearly, Whitman still feels that victory is certain despite any obstacles in the path, and he strives to convey that sense to the reader through the troops' continued movement.

The poem ends rather abruptly three lines later, but in those last three lines, Whitman manages to pack in an extraordinary amount of detail that firmly cements the idea of an unstoppable army into place: "With artillery interspers'd—the wheels rumble, the horses / sweat, / As the army corps advances" (8-10). Taken in context, the scene features columns of infantry interspersed with artillery pieces moving forward towards an unknown destination. These lines provide a massive amount of detail in that they clarify not just the beginning of the poem, as well as complete the idea of an invincible army, but also tell the reader key information about Whitman and his source material. In the beginning of this poem, Whitman describes sporadic gunfire and leaves the impression of entering a battle with the audience, but as the poem progresses, the army keeps moving without slowing down. These lines, rather than settle the question, only serve to deepen it by remaining ambiguous. This ambiguity stems from the phrase "With artillery interspers'd—the wheels rumble." The pause between "interspers'd" and "the" creates two separate interpretations, the first being that the artillery is simply moving amongst the infantry and the sound it makes is used to describe that, because "wheels rumble" is a pretty good description of the noise a cannon on the move makes. The second is much more sinister but echoes the sporadic gunfire in the beginning. "Artillery" is a pretty vague term because it refers to both the men and cannons that make up an artillery battery, but it also refers to the shells fired from the cannons in combat. If it only refers to the first definition, then the first interpretation holds true and the cannons are only travelling with the army, but if it refers to the second, then the columns of infantry really are under attack as different cannons fire different shells into them.

In this reading, the word “rumble” becomes very important because it is also a fair description of the noise a cannon makes when it is fired and thus echoes the gunfire from earlier. Although the wording is ambiguous, the overall effect is fairly clear because in either scenario progress continues. If it were a real battle, the whole column would have come to a screeching halt, especially the artillery, in order to deal with the situation. The progression in these lines is key to the idea of the invincible army, especially the last line, “As the army corps advances.” Three important things can be discerned from this line, and each of them reveal Whitman’s conception of the new war. To begin with, throughout this poem the army has been marching, but the direction has not been revealed to the reader, so for all they know the army could have been in full retreat or trying to loop around a dangerous situation, but now the direction of “advance” has been made clear. This signifies that the army is moving forward, towards a greater goal or objective and not in retreat. For an army to be advancing means that they have a set goal in mind, something that they are working towards even if it is not specified in this brief poem. For Whitman this word “advance” is key, because it shows that his cause is moving forward towards victory, not away from it. The second thing to note about this line is its slow pacing and its lack of words to describe the army’s speed. In a line like this, words like “steadily,” “rapidly,” “slowly,” or even “surely” would not be out of place, but here they are noticeably absent, allowing the reader’s mind to fill in the gap. Without one of these words, the mind automatically turns to punctuation, looking for any clue as to how fast the army is going, and given the lack of any, the mind is forced to settle on a steady, unhindered pace, the kind of pace a determined army might have if they were confident with themselves and their place. If the war was going exceedingly well, the men might be marching much faster because they knew victory was attainable with some serious work or possibly maintaining a steady pace because they knew the

enemy had absolutely no chance of survival. By the same token, if the war had taken a turn for the worse and defeat was imminent, the men might be marching very quickly to get away, or else moving slowly because they had already suffered defeat. Thankfully, Whitman fixes this dilemma with the word “advances,” which suggests a fairly positive outcome of an army marching towards inevitable victory. The last important thing to note about this line is its ending or lack thereof. This is the very last line in this poem, and Whitman chooses to wrap it up with this line. The line itself denotes an army well on its way to victory, and the punctuation supports that optimistic feeling. It is safe to assume that an exclamation point would not be out of place here; in fact, it would create a very different feel to the ending, one of an excitement about the advance towards victory, but instead it ends with a simple period. The slow yet abrupt end still leaves the reader assured that victory will come for the Union, although it is impossible to say when.

So far it has already been noted that Whitman has managed to somewhat accurately portray an army on the march, and that he has seen a few companies of men marching through Manhattan before he really got to know the soldiers personally in the hospitals. However, seeing a few soldiers on parade in the city is a far cry from seeing soldiers marching in the field, especially given the lack of discipline amongst the untrained and excited troops. All of this leads to the question of how did Whitman manage to portray this scene so accurately if he had never actually seen combat? His autobiography and his biographers are silent on this point before his trip to Washington D.C. in late 1862, but there is one possible explanation. As noted above, the war was a hot topic in both sides of the conflict, with newspapers updating constantly with the latest news from the front, but how does a public unaccustomed to civil war interpret these

jargon filled dispatches? Carol Reardon explains how the Northern public dealt with this in her study of military philosophy, especially the highly critical editors of newspapers and magazines:

These last detractors, whether truly inspired to learn more about the art of war or simply desiring to criticize McClellan . . . continued to apply the language of the military classics. Compared with the first months of the war, the selection of works available to them had expanded dramatically. Two publishing houses—D. Van Nostrand in New York City and J.B. Lippincott in Philadelphia—took the lead, each offering a rapidly lengthening list of tactical manuals, fortification and engineering treatises, and comprehensive works on the art of war. . . . Not only did the publishers enjoy brisk sales, but the popularity of such works with the general public earned them detailed reviews in newspapers across the North and in such widely circulating periodicals as the *North American Review* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. (30)

As the war progressed, so did interest in the way that it was being fought, which was a major boon to the publishing industry which was more than happy to supply the nation with a large assortment of works about war. Within this quote, Reardon makes it clear just how popular these books were, and if a person did not have access to the books, then they could still read about them in newspapers and magazines. Another thing to note is that one of the largest publishers of the time—D. Van Nostrand—was located in New York City, right where Whitman was living in the early war. If Whitman actually read one of these strategy books, it could have informed the way that he presented the army corps on the march, and even if he had not, it is likely that he would have encountered the terms and ideas because they were so popular at the time. Either way, the army he presents in this poem is a militarily perfect one, whose perfection he links to their perfect Unionist ideology. For Whitman, this is the ideal army, one that steadily marches towards an inevitable victory, not just because they are theoretically grounded, but because they are fighting for a just cause. The reason that this is the ideal army is because Whitman at this point has no real experience with the war or any real contact with the soldiers, meaning that this

army is constructed from books and Whitman's own mind, but his concept of the war is about to radically change.

### Faith Under Siege

If this had been the only military poem in the collection, the reader would walk away thinking that Whitman always had such a positive outlook on the military, but in reality this was far from the truth. In a later poem entitled "I Saw Old General at Bay" he portrays the army in a very different light. It is just as short as the previous one, but the range of emotions that it manages to evoke in the reader is just as potent. Within this poem Whitman manages to show just how much his views have changed after interacting with the men in the hospitals, and the ideal army is gone, at least in terms of how precise they were. Another huge difference is the ambiguity inherent in this poem. Like the previous one, Whitman gives the reader the minimum amount of detail which requires the reader to fill in a lot of the blanks on their own, thus allowing their own prejudices and assumptions to run rampant and possibly miss the meaning of this poem entirely.

The poem begins by describing the general himself, and this description seems innocuous enough, but it hides a wealth of information about the character and his position, but it is also slightly ambiguous: "I SAW old General at bay, / (Old as he was, his gray eyes yet shone out in battle like stars,)" (1-2). Within these two lines the reader is introduced to the main character of this poem, the General. In the previous poem there was no main character except the army as a whole, so the reader had to fill in a lot of details on his own, but not only that, no officers were mentioned, an interesting oversight, but an understandable one. In that case, the lack of officers can be attributed to the idea of portraying an army moving in unison while declining to show the

individuals that made up each column, thus showing the division of forces without specific characters. Here, though, the reader is presented with an unnamed general in a combat situation. Whitman describes the General as “Old” twice in these two lines, and the word “gray” modifies this to make the reader imagine an aging general, but even this is fairly ambiguous due to something Whitman wrote in his autobiography. In one chapter that sums up some regular soldiers’ views of the cost of the war, he describes one of the contributors like this: “The other was what we now call an ‘old veteran,’ (*i.e.*, he was a Connecticut youth, probably of less than the age of twenty-five years, the four last of which he had spent in active service in the war in all parts of the country)” (772). Having seen more combat than the troops you are with qualifies someone as an “old veteran” if this statement is to be believed, but even so it is difficult to not imagine this character as old even if it is not outright stated. The reader of the time might not have picked up on this fact, but nevertheless Whitman presents this character so ambiguously that either interpretation might be true. There is no actual physical description of this character given outside of his eyes, so much is left up to the imagination. As far as his eyes go, they are described as “sh[ining] out in battle like stars,” which suggests that he is a vibrant character who is able to understand what goes on around him. This clarity of vision suggests to the reader that not only is he a competent leader, but he is an inspiring figure as well. Whitman’s choice of “Stars” to describe an eye suggests two possible readings of these two lines. The first is fairly simple, the stars are those on the American flag, placing the General on the same level as America and requiring the same level of devotion to his forward thinking. This interpretation plays out fairly well through the rest of the poem and is completely in line with Whitman’s avowed Unionism. A Northern reader of the time would automatically assume that this character is a Union officer, and rightly so given the way the war was going in 1863, but the second

interpretation is just as likely. The second interpretation is a bit of a stretch, but given some of the wording is not hard to see because it is much more pragmatic. While the General's eyes could have been any color, for some reason Whitman chose gray, the stereotypical color of the rebel uniforms and a color which figures prominently in the nicknames of several major Confederate generals or officers. This, coupled with the "stars," which also figure prominently in the rebel flags, could lead the reader to believe the General is really a rebel instead of the Unionist he could be. This interpretation also plays out fairly well in this poem, but maybe not as well as the first.

The poem continues with a brief description of the General's troops and their predicament. These lines are particularly telling because of the way that they frame the story and further the question of how this poem should be interpreted: "His small force was now completely hemm'd in, in his works, / He call'd for volunteers to run the enemy's lines, a desperate / emergency" (3-5). Just like above, the reader is left to fill in the blanks, but it is not hard to imagine their predicament. The General's men are trapped in their lines, surrounded on all sides by the enemy, and he needs volunteers to try and get out. Historically speaking, this situation was common during several large battles, for example Shiloh and Vicksburg, and would have been quite familiar to readers of the time. As noted above in the brief quote about the popularity of military manuals, fortification manuals were fairly popular and were an accepted military practice, especially in the Mid to Late War period right when Whitman was spending a lot of time with men who would have experienced this kind of combat. Essentially in a situation like this a series of earthen trenches and berms would be constructed which would keep the enemy out of the lines and provide cover for the defenders. It was always a desperate situation to be trapped inside of fortifications because even though reinforcements might be a few miles



away there would be no way to reach them. For example, during the siege of Vicksburg, the Confederate forces created “strong redoubts on commanding heights, connected these with a chain of rifle pits, and arranged it all so that every ravine or hollow that led up to their works could be swept by artillery and musketry. In effect, any assaulting party would either have to scale a precipitous bluff or must come up through the narrow end of a funnel” (Catton 258). Fortifications on this scale were normal, but they were far from perfect, because Grant had a strategy to defeat them: “For Vicksburg was bound to fall, eventually. Grant’s line of encircling entrenchments ran thirteen miles, from the Chickasaw Bluffs north of town all the way to the Mississippi on the south, and if the Federals could not force their way in, the Confederates had even chance to force their way out” (259). The kind of stalemate that these forces found themselves in is very reminiscent of the one presented here, with one army helplessly trapped by another besieging force that could come and go at will. This same story was repeated multiple times throughout the war, and while Whitman may not have necessarily drawn inspiration from this particular battle, it is likely that a similar one helped inform this scene. These lines underscore the desperate need for aid by directly referencing the size of the force—“small”—and by the General asking for volunteers. The reader automatically skips over this request and thinks nothing of it, when in reality it is a huge deal because of what it implies. A general rarely if ever addresses his troops, and he never gives them a direct order; instead, he follows the chain of command, and the men receive the order from a lower ranking officer. This standard military practice is generally understood by everyone whether they are military or not. For a general to address his troops like this creates two completely viable possibilities for interpretation, with the first being that he overrode his other officers out of desperation and asked the unthinkable, as in asking his men to go on a suicide mission. In this scenario it is likely that his officers had

disregarded his orders because of how dangerous the mission was or because they believed it would fail and they did not want to be a part of that. This situation was not unheard of at the time for both North and South, with too many variations to list here, thus furthering the ambiguity of this poem.

The second possibility is much darker and one that also holds up historically. In this scenario the General is forced to address his troops directly because the officers under him have all been killed already, leaving him as the last officer in charge. Officer fatalities were high in combat, and it was not just lower ranking officers either but generals as well, like Albert Sidney Johnston at Shiloh or John Sedgwick at Spotsylvania Court House, making this scenario very real (Catton 116, 328). In the second scenario, Whitman magnifies the urgency of the situation by the seeming lack of officers in these lines, but in the first line the General becomes a more sympathetic character because it is such a difficult decision. The size of the force is just as important because of what is not said about it. Whitman describes it as “small,” which presents a few problems. To begin with, no mention is made of its original size, which begs the question of whether they were an already small force to begin with or they have suffered massive casualties. The use of “works” in the same line only implies that the lines were constructed but gives no hint as to their size which is important because it either heightens the sense of urgency or leaves it static. If this army has sustained massive casualties, they may have a problem holding their lines if they were constructed for a much larger force, but if the smaller army hastily constructed them then they could conceivably hold it for a much longer period of time. Either way, “small” augments every phrase that comes after it, but Whitman still leaves one question unanswered that must be addressed. He describes the besieging enemy in a roundabout way in that they do not make an appearance except in the phrase “enemy’s lines” and “completely hemm’d in.”

Nowhere in these phrases is their size referenced, but if a “small” force is being besieged and these phrases are deployed, the reader automatically assumes that it is an overwhelming number—“great” for lack of a better term. By leaving the enemy force vaguely defined, Whitman places the reader squarely in the shoes of the General, surrounded, desperate, and disoriented because you have no idea how many enemy soldiers are currently surrounding your position. By imagining this, a sort of panic fills the mind of the reader, and by being completely vague about the enemy forces either army could fill that role thus furthering the ambiguity that runs rampant in this poem.

The last thing that must be said about this request is about what it is exactly. The general has asked for volunteers to try to get through the lines in order to get reinforcements. This is a standard request that happened whenever an officer began to feel overwhelmed or outnumbered. While it was fairly standard, the problem was that it only happened during times of crisis, when the reinforcements were needed most, and in a battle like this the chances for it being fulfilled were very unlikely for two reasons. To begin with, the General is trapped in his position and seemingly cannot move forward or backward given the position of the enemy surrounding him on all sides, meaning that he is isolated from the rest of his theoretical forces that do not appear in this poem. This makes it extremely difficult not just for someone to get out, but for fresh troops to get in just like in the siege of Vicksburg. The second reason can also be inferred from the position of the army, namely that if their situation is that desperate, it is only logical to assume that the rest of the army is not faring much better, and they may also need reinforcements just as desperately. All of this creates a heightened sense of desperation for the reader, but as the next lines show, the mood may not be as somber as it appears.

Once the scene has been completely set, Whitman moves quickly into the response to the General's request: "I saw a hundred and more step forth from the ranks, but / two or three were selected" (6-7). Given the situation that this army has found itself in, this response is slightly overwhelming as these men all volunteer to risk their lives. For the first time, the men have an actual role in this poem, and their actions speak volumes as to their character. Even though the general only asked for a few volunteers, over a hundred wanted to do the job, showing the reader exactly what these men were made of. When it comes to bravery, a good chunk of it boils down to morale and a sense of duty, but it also comes down to the kind of leadership they have. The way that Whitman frames this scene is one of action and reaction, as if because the General himself has asked this of his men they will accomplish this task. In many ways this is reminiscent of the Army of the Potomac's attitude towards General Joe Hooker, which Bruce Catton describes as: "There was a great jubilant shouting when Hooker rode along the lines. The man had an air . . . and to men who thought themselves disillusioned about war he brought back an enduring touch of the color and flashing gaiety of war's romance. He made army life exciting, and under the excitement he infused a sense of great power" (210). Hooker is only one representative of the many generals who saw service in the war, but he does show what a good officer can do for the men under his command. He can lift their spirits, improve their performance, and make them feel like they can do anything. This is the kind of inspiration that the General provides for his men; otherwise, he would not be able to get nearly that many volunteers. They want to please him and live up to his expectations, but unfortunately he only needs a few volunteers.

The numbers are also interesting because they provide a few more details about their situation that influence the way that this poem should be read. An average reader would skip

over the numbers entirely, only noting that the General picked a few to try to escape. By using the phrase “two or three,” Whitman places his narrator squarely in the battle, but more than that, the phrase suggests that he was not one of the volunteers and only saw a few men step forward because he was distracted by the battle raging before him. However, this image is contradicted by the sheer number of men volunteering. If they were in such a desperate situation, it would be unusual for so many men to step away from the lines. If the force is indeed “small,” then each of those hundred has reduced the number of soldiers substantially just to volunteer for a suicide mission. This is a major problem because either they have stepped away during a lull in the fighting, leaving a few men to hold the lines, or their force is large enough to accommodate such a large contingent of volunteers despite the battle. Each of these options sounds fairly reasonable until the final number of chosen is taken into account. “Two or three” are selected for this mission, and the reader would be absolutely right in saying that that is all that is needed to make sure a message gets delivered, but it also suggests something else. If the General has a hundred spare men, but chooses to send three, it means that not only is it a suicide mission, but that he will need the remaining men in order to keep fighting. The reader only sees a reasonable number of men for the task, but fails to recognize the cold logic behind this choice. Whitman uses this number to highlight their desperate situation, and by ignoring ideology in this brief poem, he allows the reader to see an unfiltered view of the human cost of the war as a general selects three men to send to their likely deaths. The next section bluntly reinforces this idea as the poem comes to stunning close.

The poem ends with a somber scene as Whitman brings it to a close: “I saw them receive their orders aside, they listen’d with care, / the adjutant was very grave, / I saw them depart with cheerfulness, freely risking their lives” (8-10). The last few lines of this poem end very abruptly,

and the reader is not given the kind of closure that they really want from this poem that has been so morbid. After seven lines dealing with a desperate situation, they are presented with a lackluster ending that fails to tell the reader what happens. In these lines the reader is presented with three soldiers carefully listening to the general's aide for their orders, then leaving to try to run the gauntlet. Within these lines the lack of an ending is important because it reinforces the ambiguity that has been so prevalent throughout this poem. The reader cannot know the outcome of their mission for two major reasons. The first is that both the narrator and the General do not know the outcome yet because it is an ongoing action, thereby following the structure of the poem as it unfolds in real time. The other one is tied into this idea of unfolding time, and this is also where the lack of ideology really comes into play. By not revealing the outcome of this desperate mission, Whitman refuses to name a victor in this fight. It is not that he does not know who might win, but that he chooses not to reveal it because he does not want to comment on the war's progress so far. If he had made it a solidly Union army and had them lose, he could have been in trouble with his Northern readers; if the Union army had won, his readers would miss the very human portrayal of soldiers in a tight spot. If, on the other hand, Whitman had made it a solidly Confederate army and had them lose, his readers would have had absolutely no sympathy for his characters, doubly so if they had won. So he sidesteps the issue entirely by focusing solely on the characters and their sacrifices in the end. The ending line is the most powerful line of this whole poem: "I saw them depart with cheerfulness, freely risking their lives" (10). This line highlights the humanity of these men in a way that Whitman has not done before, because the audience is suddenly presented with a scene that makes no rational sense. This scene portrays the men voluntarily, and happily, going to risk it all for this mission. The act of volunteering is easily understood, but it is the act of enjoying it that is the issue for most readers. However, upon

further consideration it becomes clear why they are so happy about it. In the same way that the General inspires his men to be better, the volunteers are doing the same thing. They understand the risks and are putting on a brave face to show their comrades that anything is possible, but more than that, that they firmly believe in their cause enough to gladly risk their lives for it. Whitman wants to show his audience what kind of men both armies are made of, and this line more than any other accomplishes that. These characters seem real and their sacrifice more powerful because of the way that he set up the scene, but the effect is still chilling.

This poem, more than any other war poem in the book, does more to highlight the bravery of soldiers under fire while strongly emphasizing their humanity and the sacrifices that they have made for the defense of their respective causes. This poem tries and succeeds in showing the kind of men who are being sacrificed every day on both sides of the conflict rather than showing a victorious army that has never known defeat like in the first poem, and when the two are compared, it leaves no doubt that as the war changed, so did Whitman. His views radically changed, and this is very apparent in the way that he portrays these armies. The way that Whitman's army shifted from an invincible army marching towards victory to an army under siege underscores how he saw the war as it dragged on into its third year. However, war poetry was only part of his plan to document the war, and in the next section his poems about civilian life will reiterate the idea that his views radically changed along with the war.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE CIVILIAN EXPERIENCE

So far, Whitman has managed to cover his own experiences and the combat experiences of regular soldiers, but he also covers another very important aspect of the war. In his civilian poems, he tries to show the reader what the war was like from the civilian side, because it was being fought on their land by their own citizens. It must be said that a number of his poems that can be classified as “Civilian” more or less deal exclusively in very generalized portraits of America and frequently feature a character that is an embodiment of both America and the war at the same time. One of these poems in particular is entitled “Beat! Beat! Drums!” and summarizes how the war has affected the people at home. This is a very sympathetic portrayal and, while it does extensively cover their hardships, fails to mention the possibility that the soldiers taken by the war may not come back. In direct opposition to this view is a poem entitled “Come Up From The Fields Father” which depicts a family receiving a letter that their son has been severely wounded and will die soon. This poem emphasizes not just the tragic circumstances of the son’s death, but the family’s reaction to it as well, allowing the reader to gain a sense of what the war was like for the families involved.

#### The War Hits Home

As noted above, “Beat! Beat! Drums!” is a poem that summarizes how the war affected the civilians left behind while stressing how sudden and unexpected it was, much like “First O



Songs For A Prelude.” The major difference between these two poems is that the first one focuses solely on one city, but this one focuses on the American public as a whole, even though it is not apparent at first. Although this poem is solely about how the war will affect civilians, it does not portray these events in a negative light, and while not entirely endorsing the war it does not criticize it either. Instead it focuses on the temporary nature of these changes and how necessary they will be in order to keep America safe. The poem opens with this relentless, quick setup that stresses how short and terse this poem will be: “BEAT! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow! / Through the windows—through doors—burst like a / ruthless force” (1-3). These lines are fast paced and, because of their pacing and punctuation, actually mimic the rhythmic pacing of a drumbeat. This beat helps set the pacing for the rest of the poem, and Whitman repeats the lines at the beginning of each stanza as a way to help keep the beat and keep the reader on track in placing the emphasis on the right words and phrases, a task helped by strategic commas and line breaks. These lines also serve another purpose: highlighting the pervasive nature of the war. If these lines are to be believed, the war, signified by the bugles and drums, cannot be stopped and cannot be separated from the people waging it. The doors and windows Whitman mentions are the key nouns in these lines because they are items that can either be open or shut; they cannot be both at the same time. For them to be forced open, that would mean that they were shut, implying two separate reasons for their being shut. The first is fairly straightforward in that they were shut to the possibility of war; as noted above, Whitman described the outbreak of hostilities as an absolute shock for the entire country. The war shattered the tensions between the two rival forces, opening the door to four years of terrible destruction on almost unheard of levels. Keeping this interpretation in mind, the second reason becomes much more obvious: that the war has literally forced doors open to find its way into homes and other buildings. This

makes sense because the soldiers had to come from somewhere, and they had to fight somewhere, which is where the word “burst” comes in. It carries violent connotations and can definitely be read as an explosive word, showing just how violent the act of coming inside is, but it also mimics the destruction of property that was going to become one of the hallmarks of the war. A prime example of how the war could touch individual homes can be found in General Sherman’s destruction of Atlanta, Georgia: “The repeated bombardments during the siege had destroyed many houses, and when Sherman occupied the place about half of its normal population of thirteen thousand had fled. . . . During the long Federal occupancy of the town the deserted buildings got rough treatment from the soldiers, who never had any qualms about destroying” (Catton 355). Whitman wants to be inclusive, so he does not mention which side will receive this damage, but it is strangely prophetic because of how much damage the Union did to the Confederacy in the long run. While no major Northern city was ever threatened or treated this way, this was typical of what happened to a number of cities that fell to Union forces, with wholesale destruction becoming the norm. Either way Whitman wants to show how pervasive this war will be no matter where the reader’s loyalties lie, and the next few lines drive home how disruptive this war is going to be.

The next few lines put forth a number of images that depict a diverse America, but in the depictions themselves are a number of unusual word choices that create a stunning contrast between the loud and quick words used in the opening and the more reserved and tranquil words used here:

Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,  
Into the school where the scholar is studying,  
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he  
have now with his bride,  
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or

gathering his grain,  
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you  
bugles blow. (4-11)

These lines make up the entirety of the first stanza of this poem, and they contain four major scenes that have to be unpacked, along with the ending that reiterates the opening lines. The first major image is of a “solemn church,” a typical location for people to flock to for social reasons, as in it allows a multitude of people to gather and exchange news and information, and churches would occasionally figure prominently in major battles like Shiloh, Antietam, and Gettysburg just because they happened to be located along major roads. The word “solemn” also suggests a quiet, contemplative place, somewhere a beating drum and a blowing bugle might be unwelcome because it would disturb and break the solemnity of the scene, thus achieving the disruption called for in the opening lines. The second part of the phrase, “scatter the congregation” is equally important because it suggests two things. As noted above in the discussion about the opening lines, Atlanta was basically depopulated because of the war, and for a congregation to scatter it means that something bad has happened in their community and they no longer feel safe there. However, there is an alternate explanation that closely fits this situation. Another interpretation could be that many men in that congregation had enlisted in the military to help save their country. This interpretation is backed by the next picture—“Into the school where the scholar is studying.” A school is another one of the places where silence reigns during a lesson, but with the din of battle music it would be difficult to study, and it also would not help matters much if a great upheaval is happening all around. It was a pretty common occurrence for students and faculty to enlist en masse; in fact, one of the more infamous generals of the war, William Tecumseh Sherman, was a professor at Louisiana State Military Academy just before the war started and was informed of the secession of South Carolina while he was still teaching

there (Foote 58). Schools were full of young men—both students and teachers--itching to get out into the world and fight for their country which they felt was threatened. Unlike the church scene, the scholar is left alone; he is not shown fleeing or being disturbed, but he is still there as a nod to the continuance of life despite the war, because while many schools would close during the war the need for them was still there regardless.

The third image, that of the bridegroom, highlights how disruptive and traumatic the war will be by asking the drums and bugles to disturb him and his wife, but Whitman's word choice is particularly important. Obviously the war will separate men from their mothers, wives, and children, but his use of the word "bridegroom" and "bride" make it very clear where these characters are in their life. They have apparently just gotten married, and now he is being called away, creating a very real situation that the reader can connect to. The phrasing between the two terms is what is very important: "no happiness must he have *now*" (emphasis added). The bridegroom is not allowed to be happy while the country is at war, because while his marriage is important, his duty to his country supersedes it. The last word, "now," is key to this understanding, because it implies that what he cannot have now will still be available later, and this is where Whitman's optimism is at its most obvious. He makes it very clear to the reader that nothing bad will happen to the bridegroom while he is gone fulfilling a greater duty, one that is clearly unpleasant given the wording of "no happiness." This suggests both the horrific nature of war, but also that compared to the happiness of marriage this will be a burden. This scene is comparable to the last one in that the natural order of life is also disturbed. The last image, that of the farmer, is probably the most telling because of the repetition and the way that Whitman frames his character. He receives a brief two lines, but what the reader is told is framed beautifully: "Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or / gathering his grain."

Two words are repeated here: “peaceful” and “peace,” both of which suggest the nature of the farmer and the land he is in. War has not touched his land or himself yet, but it is going to happen no matter what. The actions of the farmer are also important—“ploughing his field” and “gathering his grain.” These actions are tied to the seasons, suggesting that the war will disrupt both actions, which opens two possible avenues of interpretation. The first fits with the pattern established by the church and the bridegroom: that the farmer himself will have to go off to war, leaving the farm for someone else to do his jobs. If the farmer stayed at home, he would be troubled by the war raging around him and the fact that he had not gone off to fight in order to defend his country. The second possibility revolves around the farmer staying on his farm, but instead of going off to war, the war comes to him. Most battles were fought wherever two armies collided with occasional planned battles thrown in, but due to the rural nature of the South, a large number of battles wound up being fought on farms whether or not the farmers really wanted them to. A really good example of this is documented by Bruce Catton as he sets up the scene for Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Courthouse: “There was even the case of Wilmer McLean, the Virginian who once owned a place by a stream named Bull Run and who found his farm overrun with soldiers in the first battle of the war” (385). This quote says it all—Wilmer McLean was a peaceful farmer who found his farm covered by soldiers as the war came right to his doorstep. His would not be the only farm to suffer, but it is very representative of the pervasive nature of the war. There is one last thing to note about the farmer’s actions—the use of the word “ploughing.” Whitman could have used any word associated with the planting process, but instead he chose this one because the audience would easily skip over it as a simple farm task that is easily understood. However, when the reader does notice it and its context—a war poem—it becomes really easy to pick up on what Whitman is trying to do with this character.

Whenever a war is about to end or has ended, the tired old phrase of “Turning swords into ploughshares” is trotted out, and this is the exact opposite of that sentiment. He uses the farmer both to stress the peace that reigned in the antebellum era and also to stress how his plough might become a weapon in the coming days. This idea is furthered by the closing lines of this stanza, which repeat the rhythmic beat of the opening and recall the same sounds to the mind of the reader. This time, though, Whitman adjusts the descriptor words used for the sounds themselves to be more descriptive and yet vaguer at the same time. The words he uses this time are “whirr,” “shrill” and “pound,” as compared to “beat” and “blow.” The original terms described the drum and bugle without much detail, but they could only be applied to those instruments. The new words definitely describe the kinds of noises these instruments are capable of making, but they also fit the kinds of arms common in the war. Weapons of the time were far from sophisticated. Their effects are easily grasped, but their sounds are very hard to describe, and as such most historians skip over them in favor of presenting their effects. One good description of their effects actually comes from the battle of Fredericksburg because it manages to convey the same kind of sounds as Whitman does: “Bridges half built, the engineers had to stop, while more than one hundred Federal guns hammered the town, pulverizing houses, knocking bricks and timbers into the empty streets . . . Silence again, and a new rush by the engineers; then Rebel sharpshooters . . . opened fire again” (Catton 187). Buildings have been razed to the ground by artillery fire that pounded them into nothingness, and it may be difficult to imagine the sounds of shells flying through the air, but there is a good chance that they might sound something like this. This battle was fought in a town in which every person or place in this first stanza could be found, and by ending it with such a violent series of noises, Whitman highlights how the civilian world will be affected.

The second stanza features more of these commonplace images that repeat essentially the same message as the first in an attempt to drive the point home that real life cannot continue as long as there is war in the country, but in the third stanza the poem takes an interesting turn. Rather than give the audience specific vocations and places, Whitman instead simplifies his imagery by boiling down the scenes to feature almost no real details, thereby allowing the audience to create their own characters. As noted above, he opens the last stanza with the line “Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!” to help set the pace, but it is the following lines that really draw the reader’s attention (25). They open with a sentiment that is very familiar and was featured in the first poem discussed in this essay: “Make no parley—stop for no expostulation, / Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer, / Mind not the old man beseeching the young man” (26-8). These lines seem fairly straightforward, but they contain a lot of information about how Whitman viewed the war. Randall Fuller writes about these lines when he says that “Whitman tries to record as honestly as possible the social costs of the war while at the same time conveying the urgency of restoring the Union” (31). Fuller stresses that these lines try to both show the necessity of the war and the cost attached to it, an important part of Whitman’s overall goal of portraying an authentic experience even if he has yet to actually come into contact with the war. The first line lays out one of the central tenets of Whitman’s early war beliefs: that no argument can be made for peace by the South because the North is solidly in the right. He is sure to place “Make no parley” first because civil war was a foreign concept to the American people, and the desire to prevent it was strong on both sides. “Parley” suggests the peaceful resolution of differences, and for sure most civilians, at least the Northern ones, were very receptive to the idea of peace talks, at least according to Whitman; else, why would he make note of how surprising the shelling of Fort Sumter was? The country was deep in talks to prevent war

at the time, but now that it has arrived, the time for talk is over. The second half of this line “Stop for no expostulation” reinforces the idea that the time for talking is over and that the time for action has arrived. Suddenly these two very civilian actions have been rendered irrelevant by the war, because no meaningful dialogue can be had when every thought or concern is centered solely on the war and its varied problems. These problems are hinted at in the next line when Whitman writes “Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer.” He has already said that the time for talking is over, but this reinforces that notion, especially when it comes to the first part of this line. “Mind not the timid” is a pretty powerful statement on its own, because it suddenly discredits an entire portion of the population, a portion that might have serious issues with going to war or that might want to avoid it. He clearly repudiates this belief by basically telling his readers to ignore anyone who has a negative opinion of the war as he wants his readers to embrace this new future, thus the second part of the line: “Mind not the weeper or prayer.” These two have been equated with “timid” and in fact help to define what Whitman believed “timid” was. The “weeper” in this case can probably be best understood as someone nostalgic for the America that was and who wishes that everything would just go back to the uneasy powder keg that it used to be before the war. They focus too much on the past and not enough on the present, and given how tumultuous this period was, it would be hard to blame them, but Whitman knew that his nation would triumph, it had to, and it would be better than ever. The “prayer” is much the same, believing in the Union but not necessarily how it is proceeding, praying for a better option than war. Unfortunately Fort Sumter ended those hopes, but the idea still hung on, just like those who wanted to talk out a peaceful solution. The last line in this quote, when taken in context, modifies these statements into a much stronger sentiment: “Mind not the old man beseeching the young man.” By repeating the phrase “Mind not,” Whitman is listing the



different voices that must be ignored, and “the old man” is clearly representative of the worst kind of voices. He is instantly equated with the “timid,” the “weeper,” and the “prayer” as he is “beseeching the young man.” It is pretty clear what he is begging the young man not to do—go off to war. He has failed to understand how important the war is and how pervasive that it has become—and in Whitman’s mind, he has become the worst kind of person. By telling the young man to ignore the voice of his elder, he clearly endorses the war and its aims, because he understands the nature of this conflict better than any other authority figure, or so he wants the reader to believe. This also helps to place this poem solidly in the civilian realm as well, because, as noted above, “Old man” is another word for veteran or higher ranking officer, and no young man would dare go against the wishes of a commanding officer, even if he did fail to understand the nature of the conflict as a whole.

The last few images in this poem are just as powerful, but they help to drive the point home: “Let not the child’s voice be heard, nor the mother’s entreaties, / Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie / awaiting the hearses” (29-31). The first line in this quote invokes an image that the reader has seen before, both in Whitman and in numerous other places—the image of a mother begging her child not to go off to war. In his earlier use of this same image, Whitman had the mother remain silent as her son left because she knew it was for the best, but here he lets her speak, only to tell the reader to completely ignore her. This command can be interpreted in two ways given its context. The first is that this is the mother of a soldier who begs him not to go. This fits because it is a fairly common image, but when the first line is taken into account, the likelihood of this interpretation is lessened. Children do not always understand current events in the way that adults want them to; they view the world in very simple terms, and for a child in a time of war, all they may see is their father leaving, so it is completely natural for

them to beg their father to stay with them. In this case, the reader becomes the father, and the mother becomes the wife, and the reader is presented with a family begging them not to leave because they do not want to risk losing a husband and a father. This concern is very real, and it is one of the few real allusions to the tragic nature of war that Whitman makes in this poem, but he casually dismisses the concern. By telling the reader to disregard both the child and the mother, who both probably have real cases for why the soldier should not leave, Whitman is suggesting that their fears are unfounded because the soldier will survive the war, much like he promised that the bridegroom will return to live happily with his bride. Life will be interrupted, but only briefly, and that is the major message of this line. The following image is a little more difficult to understand because it does not fit the pattern of living civilians dealing with the conflict. In fact it seems quite shocking, but there is a reason for its inclusion. It fits the pattern of peace being disturbed by war, as evidenced by the phrase “shake the dead where they lie.” The dead are resting peacefully when the war disturbs their rest, meaning that no one, not even the dead, can escape the war, but it also suggests something a whole lot darker. Whitman has already shown the reader characters that must be disregarded if the war is to be waged, but always living characters that have a stake in it. Now he has shown the reader a cast of characters, the dead, who seemingly have no stake in it. Despite this fact, they do have a stake in it, because they are the ones who helped to shape and form the country as it was developing, doing everything they could to keep it together, creating situations that would eventually lead to civil war. Whitman’s point in including them is that they should not rest in peace as long as there is war in their country. They failed at creating lasting peace, but it is not entirely their fault, either, because it is difficult to have a peaceful rest knowing that the living have destroyed the peace they worked so hard to build. The dead are the ultimate civilians because they cannot fight this war, only the

living can, and by including them Whitman highlights just how pervasive and devastating this necessary war will be as it touches every facet of American society. From churches to schools and the cradle to the grave, Whitman heralds the coming of war while assuring the public that victory is certain and that every man will come home, the quintessential early war view and one that will radically change after coming into contact with actual soldiers who have experienced combat.

### A Family's Worst Nightmare

The previous poem examined how Whitman thought the war would affect society by drawing on common images to illustrate his point that the war was going to be extremely pervasive. Despite this effort to show how much the war was going to change society, he never mentioned the possibility that the men taken by the war would never come home again. In fact, it was the exact opposite in that he made it very clear that they would return once they had achieved victory over their enemies. This is a common theme in his early war poetry, but as noted elsewhere in this paper, his views shifted, and he began to show the human costs of the war with poems about broken, injured men—even portraying their deaths in a few poems. However, one poem in particular stands out because while the subject deals with the death of a soldier, it does not portray the effects on his comrades or the people around him; it focuses solely on the reaction of his family to his injury and death. In the poem entitled “Come Up from the Fields Father,” Whitman realistically portrays a family’s reaction to the news that their son has been killed. It has a very slow build up to the reveal of this fact, and in the process Whitman makes a number of points about the war and his perception of it. He tries very hard to set the poem against a realistic background that subtly tells the audience information about the family

and the message that Whitman wants the reader to walk away with. The reactions of the characters themselves stress to the reader how much the death of a soldier can affect a family.

The poem begins fairly simply with the lines: “COME up from the fields father, here’s a letter from our Pete, / And come to the front door mother, here’s a letter from thy / dear son” (1-3). The reader is immediately presented with a very normal scene of a family gathering to read the latest letter from their son and brother, anxious to hear about his welfare and what he has been doing to help the war effort. Already there are three things to note from this brief quote that will inform the rest of the poem. The first is that it will be set in a rural area, thus the word “fields” which implies an agricultural setting. The second thing is that for the first time anywhere in this book of poems, a soldier gets a name. Whitman wants the reader to sympathize with this character, and the best way to make him seem human is to name him. By giving him a fairly generic name, Whitman allows the reader to assign any appearance that he wants to this character. The last thing is not really that obvious, but it ties back into the naming of the character. He is not addressed by rank or even unit, which again allows the reader to create their own Pete as it were. Without rank, it is hard to pin down an age-range, and without a unit designation it is hard to pin down where exactly he has been battle wise or even how long he might have been in service. Whitman has essentially created an everyman character as he could literally be anyone anywhere, thus allowing the reader’s mind to roam free with possibilities.

Once he finishes this groundwork, Whitman launches into a rather long description of the area, but within this description are numerous words and phrases that build upon one another to create an idyllic setting. While the quote may seem long, it is hard to break up without losing the charming effect that Whitman tries to create:

Lo, ‘tis autumn,  
Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder,

Cool and sweeten Ohio's villages with leaves fluttering in the  
moderate wind,  
Where apples ripe in the orchards hang and grapes on the  
trellis'd vines,  
(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?  
Smell you the buckwheat where the bees were lately  
buzzing?)  
Above all, lo, the sky so calm, so transparent after the rain,  
and with wondrous clouds,  
Below too, all calm, all vital and beautiful, and the farm  
prosperes well. (4-16)

The pastoral scene presented in this quotation is absolutely beautiful and framed in such a way that the reader can almost smell the fruit and feel the wind on their face as they gaze upon this prosperous Ohio farm. On the surface this seems like a standard description and can easily be skipped over because it appears to have no relevance to the story, but on a closer look, it does more to set the scene than anything else in this poem. To begin with, the adjectives he uses here, particularly “moderate,” “calm,” “wondrous,” “vital,” “beautiful,” and “prosper,” when taken as a whole, work together to create a sense of calm in the reader as they are the exact opposite of the kinds of adjectives usually associated with war. The same can be said for the descriptions of orchards, fields, and grape vines—all of which feature plants ready for harvest. Ohio was a solidly pro-Union state, and was largely untouched during the war, which means a scene like this is not uncommon. It creates a distinct contrast from the typical ravages of war; for example, think back to the description of Atlanta after Sherman captured it. Prosperity is the opposite of destruction, and that is what Whitman tries to get across to the reader so that when death comes, it is very shocking to the reader. On the surface it seems to be just another prosperous farm, but it is clearly harvest time, the time of the year when the best fruits are plucked from the earth in order to sustain life for another year. This is significant in a poem about death, especially the death of a soldier who has become the perfect citizen by sacrificing it all.

Once he has set up this extended death metaphor, Whitman begins to move back towards the real story, the one that holds the audience's interest. He begins by repeating the call for the parents to come closer and then asks the mother to open the envelope, when the scene takes a really dark turn: "O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd, / O a strange hand writes for our dear son, O stricken / mother's soul!" (26-8). The scene turns from excitement at the prospect of getting a letter from their son, to horror as they discover that he did not write it. The mother has every right to be concerned because it is never a good sign when a family receives a letter about their loved one instead of from them, and Whitman knew that this was a powerful subject for a poem. During his tenure in the hospitals, Whitman wrote a number of these letters to families, often because the soldier was unable to due to illness or injury, or occasionally because they did not know how to write. Unfortunately, Whitman only mentions these letters in his autobiography, so the reader is left to imagine just how he would have written one, just as he was left to imagine how it would be received. Some background information must be explained that the reader is likely to completely miss because it involves the authorship question. As noted very early on with the example of the 13th Brooklyn, men frequently joined units with their friends and neighbors, so it was entirely possible that Pete's unit included people from home that his family would have known. If this was the case, it is likely that he could have had one of them write home for him. Instead, it is "a strange hand" that writes the letter for him, meaning that he is likely surrounded by strangers, a tragic situation that Whitman directly references in "The Wound-Dresser." This is a small but important aspect of this letter, and Whitman builds upon this tragedy by elaborating upon the mother's reaction in the next few lines: "All swims before her eyes, flashes with black, she catches the / main words only, / Sentences broken" (29-31). These lines seem fairly self-explanatory, but they raise some questions that the reader has to

answer. These questions relate to how the mother reads and interprets the letter, focusing on the last line: "Sentences broken." She clearly has a hard time comprehending the letter because she is only able to catch the key words in it, but this is a fairly normal phenomenon because everyone reads to catch the key words in important documents. What makes this important is the state of the letter and the way that it has been written, as in, has Pete dictated it, or has someone else written it in his place, which is important because this determines the kind of information relayed. If Pete had in fact dictated it to someone like Whitman, chances are high that it would be framed in much more pleasant terms that would keep his mother from becoming so distressed at this apparent bad news. But if someone else had written it about Pete because he was unable to, then likely it would be much more broken and fragmented because they might not know enough about Pete to help soften the blow by including positive things like stories about him or places they have gone. This interpretation is the more plausible one because of the phrases that Whitman uses in describing the actual text of the letter: "Sentences broken, *gunshot wound in the breast, cavalry / skirmish, taken to hospital, / At present low, but will soon be better*" (31-3). Whitman put these lines in italics for a reason, and the reader automatically assumes that this is a direct quote from the letter, but there is a chance that it may not be. The reader assumes that these are the key words that the mother has drawn out of the letter, but it is just as likely that these "Sentences broken" are being spoken by the mother in disbelief of what she is reading. Either way, the reader is able to experience what the mother does by seeing the same scene she does. Pete has been shot during a cavalry skirmish and then taken to a hospital where he is recuperating despite being "low." These are the bare bones of a story, the bare minimum and the only words that the mother can see, but they are also just enough to explain the situation to the family and create some hope that he might write them soon.

By including the text of the letter, Whitman allows his audience to experience the same shock and fear that a civilian of that time would feel upon receiving such bad news. This is in contrast to the earlier stanza describing the peaceful, content country setting, because by building up such a strong image of a happy time, he is able to highlight just how traumatic this scene really is, and he does so in the following lines:

Ah now the single figure to me,  
Amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio with all its cities and  
farms,  
Sickly white in the face and dull in the head, very faint,  
By the jamb of the door leans. (34-8)

These lines stress how deeply this has impacted the mother as she feels weak and sick, propped up only by the doorframe. Within this description are a number of words that strengthen the contrast between her and the countryside that the reader subconsciously picks up on in order to feel the full effect of the comparison. One of the most important words is “single” as it highlights how alone the mother is feeling at that exact moment even though she is surrounded by her family. Whitman augments this in turn by using the word “teeming” almost right underneath it, which always suggests a multitude of something in constant motion, which provides a severe contrast between the single, stationary mother and the “teeming” city. The other major word to focus on here is “wealthy,” which always suggests bright, shiny riches. Almost right underneath it is the word “dull,” which means dark, dingy, the farthest thing from “wealthy” imaginable. This suggests that something has gone out of the mother, as in the spirit that made Ohio wealthy embodied in her son. She immediately thinks the worst, but as her family tries to reassure her, Whitman reveals certain facts about the situation.

Whitman goes out of his way to show that the tragic nature of this letter is not confined to just the mother by describing the rest of the family’s reactions. He also provides closure to the



story by telling the reader exactly what has happened to Pete while also exposing his own thoughts on this tragedy:

*Grieve not so, dear mother,* (the just-grown daughter speaks  
through her sobs,  
The little sisters huddle around speechless and dismay'd,)  
*See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be better.*  
Alas poor boy, he will never be better, (nor may-be needs to  
be better, that brave and simple soul,)  
While they stand at home at the door he is dead already,  
The only son is dead. (39-46)

The oldest sister tries to comfort their mother by emphasizing the end of the letter that says Pete is getting better, even though she is fighting tears herself. The daughter clearly does not believe it and neither does the mother, but the attempt must be made if Whitman is to create a truly human response. One phrase used to describe this sister can be used as a pure descriptor phrase, but it is also used to create a growing sense of shared tragedy. “Just-grown” can be used to describe a teenager, old enough to understand the situation but just immature enough to not understand that there are times where silence is preferable. The reader just assumes that it is a way to tell them how old this character is, but it is also used to convey emotional maturity. “Just-grown” implies a recent change, as if it just happened, and after reading a letter that the only son has been seriously injured, she may have grown up right then knowing that her older brother might not come home and that all of his responsibilities will fall on her and her sisters whether they like it or not. They are all crying because they know just how bad this situation really is, even though they are trying to look on the bright side. This heartbreak is exactly what Whitman is trying to get across to his audience: that as bad as things are for the soldiers, the families have it worse. The daughter’s speech ends with the word “better” which is repeated two more times in order to infuse a grander meaning into the poem. The daughter used it meaning that Pete will recover, but when Whitman uses it again it takes on another meaning altogether. The first time he uses it, he

means that Pete will not recover when he writes “Alas poor boy, he will never be better,” but he also means that Pete has reached the pinnacle of devotion to his country by dying for it, a fact that he reinforces in the next line: “nor may-be needs to be better, that brave and simple soul.” Pete cannot be better because he has given it all, and that emphasizes both his humanity and the sacrifices that he has made for his country. In this line Whitman also echoes another statement that he made in “The Wound-Dresser.” There he wrote a prayer asking for one of his patients to die because he had suffered enough, and here he mimics that statement by suggesting that if Pete were to recover he would never be the same person again, never as perfect as he once was.

This quotation ends with Pete’s death, and it clears up a few things that explain why this tragedy has hit the family so hard and why it will come back to haunt them. To begin with, it clearly states that despite the letter informing them of his injury and probable recovery Pete is dead and has been dead, likely long before they received the letter. This fact is evident from the phrase “dead already,” which suggests that rather than him dying just as they open the letter, he has been dead for a while. Injuries at this time were uncertain, with a person showing signs of a full recovery only to die of infection or disease. The other thing to note is the end of this quote: “The only son is dead.” It is a very final, short, terse statement that leaves no room for sentimentality or verbosity. Whitman lets the words speak for themselves as the tragedy of the situation sets in. Suddenly it is very clear why the family is so emotional and so distraught over one letter. Their only son and brother has been seriously wounded; they do not know if he is alive or dead, and the uncertainty is destroying them.

The reader of course already knows the outcome of the situation, so rather than leave them in limbo Whitman suddenly moves far into the future by telling the reader how the mother copes with the death of her only son:

But the mother needs to be better,  
She with thin form presently drest in black,  
By day her meals untouch'd, then at night fitfully sleeping,  
often waking,  
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep  
longing,  
O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape  
and withdraw,  
To follow, to seek, to be with her dead son. (47-55)

Whitman ends this poem with a very depressing scene of a mother mourning for her child. He wants her to recover and be normal again, thus the phrase “needs to be better,” but he does not define how she is to accomplish that goal. His desire for her to find peace is an important part of this poem, one that underpins his respect for the soldiers who have been taken by the war.

Whitman has stressed repeatedly the tragic nature of Pete’s death, but here he stresses how Pete’s death has affected his mother in a very real way by describing how she has lost sleep, stopped eating, and wishes to withdraw from the world. This kind of grief is understandable as she has just lost her only son, and it is easy to feel sympathy for her. A grieving mother is a powerful image and one that can easily be used to ask if the war is worth the cost, as she herself is likely asking the same thing, and so it must be used carefully to avoid appearing anti-war. Whitman recognizes this, and by stating that she “needs be better,” he wants her to see the good that her son has helped bring into the world, and to see that his sacrifice meant something. He could easily have left the reader with an image of a grieving mother as a statement against the costs of the war, but instead he accurately depicts the kinds of emotions that normally accompany grief while wishing for her to “be better” and to realize the greater meaning of her son’s death.

In this poem, Whitman has managed to stress the human cost of the war by presenting the reader with a scene of unimaginable grief as a family struggles to cope with the loss of a son. He manages to humanize the dead man by naming him and by showing how much his family cares

for him while at the same time tempering the scene by suggesting to the reader the justness of the cause Pete died for. In comparison to “Beat! Beat! Drums!” this poem succeeds in presenting an accurate portrayal of how the civilians had to cope with the ravages of war, whereas the earlier poem simply highlighted how different things would be until the men returned home. Between the two poems, Whitman’s views changed a great deal as he learned how much the war could devastate a family by writing letters to families informing them of grievous injury or death, a sobering job that could force anyone to rethink their life. This final poem drives home the point that Whitman’s views changed by providing the reader with an image that they cannot forget—a grieving mother. As far as images go, this is one of the most powerful, and one that Whitman encountered in the hospitals, and once he had witnessed it he knew that for some civilians their life would never be the same again, and that his promises of a safe return for everyone were empty, but he did not lose hope. Whitman’s faith in the Union prevented this, and a discussion of this faith is necessary.

## CHAPTER V

### WHITMAN'S DEMOCRACY

Throughout this paper, Whitman's faith in democracy has been cited as the reason he did not entirely lose faith in the war, but it has not really been elaborated on. Over his lifetime, Whitman wrote hundreds of poems and dozens of essays about any number of things, but America and democracy were some of his favorite subjects and appear all over his work ranging from brief quotations to extended discussions. Daniel Aaron notes that "*Union* was the keel that kept his religion, philosophy, and aesthetic from foundering" (59). "Union" is the key word in this quote, and it is key to understanding Whitman's work as it appears everywhere in one form or another. This makes it really easy to discuss his view of America, but it is also a challenge due to the massive amount of material to choose from. Out of all of Whitman's writings, a few works stand out as being particularly important sources for information about his view of America. From Whitman's poetry, a few poems stand out, especially "Song of Myself," "From Paumanok Starting I Fly like a Bird," "Song of the Exposition," and "A Song For Occupations." Whitman's prose is dense but filled with valuable insight into how he viewed the world, especially *Specimen Days*, his autobiography, which contains several chapters about what the war meant for America. However, a few other prose works contribute heavily to this view, especially *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads*, *Origins of Attempted Secession* and especially *The Eighteenth Presidency!*, a political tract that fully outlines Whitman's pre-war views about America.

“Song of Myself” is one of Whitman’s most popular poems and because of its length manages to encompass a lot of ideas and a lot of detail, especially when it comes to nationalism. Throughout this poem he makes numerous references to different regions of America in an attempt to show the country’s size and to document the kind of people that live in each region. Early on he makes a statement that really sums up his outlook on America:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,  
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,  
Stuffed with the stuff that is coarse, and stuffed with the  
stuff that is fine,  
One of the great nation, the nation of many nations—the  
smallest the same and the largest the same,  
A southerner as well as a northerner. (330-7)

Whitman claims to be part of everything, acknowledging the dual nature of humanity as he is both masculine and feminine, “old and young,” “coarse” and refined, all of which leads to his big revelation: the unified nature of America. Despite being from the North, he does not see himself as a Northerner; instead, Whitman sees himself as an American, part of a greater whole. The list of opposites may not seem important at first, as it seems like they only apply to Whitman, but in reality they are strategically placed so Whitman can make a point. He claims that anyone from anywhere can be an American because all kinds are the same. This idea comes from the second to last line: “the smallest the same and the largest the same.” This suggests two things: firstly, that an immigrant’s country of origin does not matter because in America everyone is an American, and secondly, class does not matter either because nationality supersedes everything. Whitman completes this idea in the last line when he writes that he is “a southerner soon as a northerner,” a line that is important because it wipes away regional tensions. At this time, the country had polarized into slave and free states, with the South in the slave camp and the North in the free camp, so to brush off the tension is a huge statement because Whitman is trying to

force his audience to recognize that they are greater than their region and that despite their differences they are Americans first. Whitman drives this point home by not capitalizing “southern” or “northern,” thereby relegating the terms to simple directions instead of regions. This point, which reappears frequently throughout his poetry and prose, defines his views on America.

While *Drum-Taps* may primarily be a book of poems about the Civil War, it also includes a few poems that have very little to do with the war and everything to do with patriotism. One of those is “From Paumanok Starting I Fly like a Bird,” a short poem that stresses the importance of American unity. One of the key phrases in this poem appears near the end and comes after he lists off several different states: “to roam / accepted everywhere” (11-2). It is easy to skip over these two lines because they do not stand out, but they continue the idea of national unity. Whitman wants to be able to travel the country, seeing everything while being “accepted everywhere.” He does not want his state or region to define him, nor does he want people to judge him based on those criteria; he wants to be judged on his own merit. As noted above, tensions were running high before and during the war, making travel difficult, especially for a Yankee who wanted to go down South and who would definitely be judged based on his politicians and their rhetoric. Whitman continues this idea of acceptance in the last three lines of the poem where he makes some strong ideological claims: “To sing first, (to the tap of the war-drum if need be,) / The idea of all, of the Western world one and inseparable, / And then the song of each member of these States” (13-5). The first line is ominous; Whitman wants to “sing” unity, as in champion it, and he will, even if war is the only way to make sure it happens. This action cannot be stopped, and Whitman is very clear on that point because he will make himself heard. It also suggests that war is the only way to ensure unity, not just for the right to be heard but for

it to actually happen. The next line reinforces this idea and takes it a step further when he uses the phrase “the Western world one and inseparable.” Suddenly, the idea of unity has been expanded to include the whole “Western world,” a fact that cannot be ignored. Whitman wants to sing the unity of Europe and America, but America will still be on top, as his letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson notes: “You are young, have the perfectest of dialects, a free press, a free government, the world forwarding its best to you. As justice has been strictly done to you, from this hour do strict justice to yourself. Strangle the singers who will not sing you loud and strong. Open the doors of The West” (1328). Whitman believed in the perfection of American culture as the best and brightest from Europe made their way to live in America; he saw it as only natural that they would flock to the best. By making this claim, Whitman is trying to make America feel proud of what it has accomplished in its short existence, so he stresses the appeal of its government, its press, and its appeal to foreign nationals who want to make a home there. Richard Rorty makes a similar observation about the way that Whitman tries to make America take pride in itself: “Dewey and Whitman wanted Americans to continue to think of themselves as exceptional, but both wanted to drop any reference to divine favor or wrath. . . .They wanted Americans to take pride in what America might, all by itself and by its own lights, make of itself, rather than in America’s obedience to any authority” (15-6). According to Rorty, Whitman’s ultimate goal is to not just make America proud, but to realize what they can accomplish with the gifts that have been bestowed upon them through the virtue of their country. Whitman already recognized the unifying factor of American culture as so many different nations came together; it was only a matter of time before they really were “inseparable.” Whitman places the phrase about the world ahead of the states because they are only part of the whole. The States each receive their own song, but not before Whitman covers everything else, proving that national and



international unity is more important than anything else. Whitman repeatedly uses this theme of national unity so much that it is one of the main tenets of his beliefs and the primary reason that he did not become completely disillusioned with the war.

National unity as a theme is fairly common in Whitman's work, but in one poem he takes it to another level by dedicating the entire nation to the idea of America as well as declaring the everlasting union. "Song of the Exposition" is one of Whitman's longer poems, and in it he tries to create a snapshot of America after the Civil War. The dedication scene occurs late in the poem and is hidden inside a large catalogue of images, making it easy to miss, but the message it sends is unmistakable:

All thine O sacred Union!  
Ships, farms, shops, barns, factories, mines  
City and State, North, South, item and aggregate,  
We dedicate, dread Mother, all to thee! (8.51-4)

Whitman firmly believes that everything belongs to America—all trade, vehicles, property, food, goods, even whole regions belong to the nation. Once again, Whitman presents the states and their inhabitants as subjects of the nation, further demonstrating that for him everything comes back to national unity. Two phrases are key to this passage, the first being "North, South." This small phrase features the two main regions of America, but more importantly, they are capitalized and the reader's eye is drawn to them. Whitman fully acknowledges the difference between the two, but in so doing has them both dedicated to the spirit of America. Because they are now in a subservient role, he can allow them to have a regional identity without fear of conflict because that issue has already been settled. The other key phrase is "item and aggregate," another brief phrase that underscores the message that Whitman is trying to convey. "Item" is a singular word, usually referring to one thing, whereas "aggregate" always refers to the total of numerous things, meaning that each thing listed before and each group has been dedicated.

Through this phrase, Whitman conveys the totality of what has been offered without creating an even longer, comprehensive list. In the next stanza he reiterates the totality of his dedication when writes that: “None separate from thee—henceforth One only, we and thou” (9.27). Not only has he dedicated everything, Whitman has explicitly stated that nothing can ever leave America because of how important it is, and because of what dedication entails. When Whitman writes that everything has been dedicated to America, that means that America will use those things to better itself, meaning that those who work for America will benefit from this labor, and by trying to separate from the whole, they will damage the Union irreparably as those benefits are lost forever. These benefits are crucial to how Whitman views America—as a whole entity that benefits everyone involved because they are one people who share a common fate irreversibly linked with America.

While the previous poems stressed national unity, another facet of that union mentioned is the people themselves. Whitman has already stated that the people should see themselves as Americans first, and in “A Song for Occupations” he stresses the importance of the American people, which creates an image that definitely makes up a portion of his belief system. This image appears directly after a series of lines about religion and America, and it applies equally to both: “I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of / you still, / It is not they who give the life, it is you who give the life” (3.50-2). So far Whitman has already claimed that all good comes from the nation and that all people belong to the nation, but here he reiterates a simple tenet of government: it cannot exist without its citizens, and while they may have created it, it is still a living entity that will grow and change as the people do. If the government stops changing and adapting with the times, the people will let it die, but as long as it stays close to its citizens it will survive. The government belonging to the people is a simple idea and one that

Whitman has fully embraced as a facet of his greater ideology. He believes not only in national unity and the domination of the national government but also in the symbiotic relationship between a nation and its people. His ideas seem fairly simple because his poetry, though complex, lays out these tenets in a way that makes them very accessible to the reader. His prose, on the other hand, is dense and difficult to find such easy maxims.

In *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads*, Whitman gives an intellectual history of *Leaves of Grass* and in the process makes some remarks about the development of America and its significance to his creative process. While he primarily discusses composition, he makes frequent comparisons between America and Europe, and it is in these sections that his beliefs about America are evident. One passage in particular stands out as he begins to explore the differences between America and Europe: "Think of the United States to-day—the facts of these thirty-eight or forty empires solder'd in one—sixty or seventy millions of equals, with their lives, their passions, their future—these incalculable, modern, American, seething, multitudes around us, of which we are inseparable parts!" (660-1). Whitman's excitement at the prospect of a bright future is evident in these lines, but it is the way that he presents this future that tells the reader what he actually believes. He anticipates the future by forgetting how many states there are in America, but by terming them "empires" he is able to conjure up in the mind of the reader an immense, powerful country that can subjugate these empires to its will. Most importantly, the way Whitman phrases that—"forty empires solder'd in one"—suggests that even though these "empires" have been forged into one grand entity, they still maintain their identities and are still marvelous to behold. The other thing to note about this passage is that as Whitman is listing off words to describe the people who live in these states, he includes the word American among them. The reader easily dismisses that because of course they are American; it should go without

saying. However, by including “American” in the list, Whitman is able to draw a parallel between it and the other words in the list, as in they have all become synonymous with America. In order to be “American,” the people must be “equal,” “passion[ate],” “incalculable, modern,” “seething,” and “multitudinous.” Whitman once again champions the idea of equality since all citizens belong to America, but he also sets forth the idea of an ever-changing, always moving society that is definitely forward-thinking. This idea is central to Whitman’s conception of America—a unified nation at the forefront of progress because it has attracted the best people in the world to its shores, one that recognizes the value of its citizens and respects the idea that government comes from the people, not from itself. As an example of how this great nation has benefitted the arts, Whitman writes about the debt he owes to America a few sentences later: “I know very well that my ‘Leaves’ could not possibly have emerged or been fashion’d or completed, from any other era than the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, nor any land than democratic America, and from the absolute triumph of the National Union arms” (661). Whitman is fully aware of how the times influenced his writing, but the emphasis on “absolute triumph” is key to understanding his view of America. Whitman could easily have credited this to the American people or to the generals and politicians who helped ensure the victory, but instead he credits it entirely to the idea of “National Union,” a concept that means everything to Whitman.

He did not conceive this idea of the supremacy of “National Unity” until much later in life, however, and some of his earlier writings contradict this entire concept. In *The Eighteenth Presidency!*, dated 1856, Whitman lays out a complex view of American government, focusing on the relations between the government and the states, and the government and the people (1306). In this complex system Whitman makes several observations about how he viewed

America before the war, and it differs from his later views in several significant ways.

Whitman's later views on America are clear, but his views about the different branches are not mentioned in his later work, but the section about the Constitution lays the groundwork for understanding how he conceived the relationship between the federal government and the states:

The Federal Constitution is the second of the American organic compacts. The premises, outworks, guard, defense, entrance of the Federal Constitution, is the primary compact of These States, sometimes called the Declaration of Independence; and the groundwork, feet, understratum of that again, is its deliberate engagement, in behalf of the States, thenceforward to consider all men to be born free and equal into the world, each one possessed of inalienable rights to his life and liberty . . . This is the covenant of the Republic from the beginning, now and forever. It is not a mere opinion; it is the most venerable pledge, with all the forms observed, signed by the commissioners, ratified by The States, and sworn to by Washington at the head of his army, with his hand upon the Bible. . . . Above all, it is carefully to be observed in all that relates to the continental territories. When they are organized into States, it is to be passed over to the good faith of those States. (1318-9)

Whitman's conception of America is fairly straightforward: the States agreed to unify under a single government that was based on basic truths. According to Whitman, the foundation of this agreement is the Declaration of Independence, the document that helped America become a nation as it tried to separate from Britain. This simple history lesson underpins his concept of America, because when the States came together to enforce that document, they agreed with principles it espoused, which in turn became the basis for the Constitution. Whitman notes that every procedure was followed in creating and enforcing this document, because if there was a single misstep the legitimacy of the system would be in doubt. The sentence that really drives this point home is "This is the covenant of the Republic from the beginning, now and forever." Whitman firmly believed that the "Republic" is an ongoing, living institution that is impossible to break, because the word "covenant" implies an agreement that cannot be broken. It is up to the federal government to protect this "covenant" in the "territories," but it is up to the States

themselves to guard their own freedoms. While Whitman stresses the strength of their union, he does not stress the supremacy of the federal government; instead, he places the power firmly with the states, which is where the major divergence occurs. Whitman elaborates on this idea in two more places, and the ideas that he espouses are very far from his other ideals.

Whitman clarifies the idea that the states must guard themselves when he writes that:

I said the national obligation is passed over to The States. Then if they are false to it, and impose upon certain persons, can the national government interfere? It can not, under any circumstances whatever. We must wait, no matter how long. There is no remedy except in The State itself. A cornerstone of the organic compacts of America is that a State is perfect mistress of itself. If that is taken away, all the rest may just as well be taken away, when that is taken away, this Union is dissolved. (1320)

According to Whitman, the power placed with the states is immense, enough so that they can police themselves and rule as they see fit without any government interference. Whitman has a very hands-off approach to government, and his insistence on allowing the states to fix themselves leads to a rather dark conclusion. If the federal government intervened, then the union would break up automatically, because it has violated the independence of the state and overstepped its bounds. The government should work with and for states not against them. The federal government is necessary to protect the freedoms of the states, while the states protect the freedoms of their people. This idea is echoed in a major political document created by the South Carolina Secession Convention entitled “Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union.” This document was created by the men who decided to become the first state to secede from the Union, and it would used a sa model for every other seceding state, and in the opening paragraphs states as a summary of their previous actions: “The people of the State of South Carolina in Convention assembled, on the 2d day of April, A.D. 1852, declared that frequent violations of the Constitution of the United States

by the Federal Government, and its encroachments upon the reserved rights of the States, fully justified this State in, their withdrawal from the Federal Union” (Loewen 112). The idea that the federal government was interfering with the states is not limited to Whitman—in fact it was a cornerstone of the South’s right to secede, which makes it hard for a modern audience to separate Whitman from the ranks of the secessionists. Despite his avowed unionism, Whitman has created a simple ideology, but one that leaves a bad taste in the mouth of modern readers because of the example he gives to illustrate this point. In a later section Whitman takes it upon himself to address slave owners in the South on behalf of the North: “From my mouth hear the will of These States taking form in great cities. Where slavery is, there it is. The American compacts, common sense, all things unite to make it the affair of the States diseased with it, to cherish the same as long as they see fit, and to apply the remedy when they see fit. But not one square mile of continental territory shall . . . be given to slavery” (1323). Whitman believes in the sovereignty of the states enough to allow slavery to continue, provided that it stays only in those states and that the federal government will not allow it to spread to the territories it controls. The states must deal with this issue on their own without federal interference, which creates a moral quandary for a modern reader, but it was a situation that Whitman felt comfortable with enough to make a tenet of his concept of America. In terms of the slavery issue, Whitman was not alone in thinking this, because this passage dealt with the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 as championed by Daniel Webster. Daniel Aaron makes a very important point about this law when he writes:

To Emerson, the very notion of a broker-politician reconciling Right and Wrong was a profanation. To Webster and his friends, who took disunion sentiment seriously and struggled to shore up a collapsing Union, the Emersonians threatened the Founders’ dream by their egotistic fantasies. Webster may have palliated the horror of slavery, but in 1850 when the average antislavery Northerner . . . misread the Southern temper, Webster and the Southern Unionists did not exaggerate the secession threat.

Webster's logic made no sense to an abolitionist who believed the Union was already rotten with the slavery cancer. (10-1).

Whitman was able to do what Emerson could not—reconcile the freedom of America with the institution of slavery. He saw the attempts of Webster as an attempt to save the Union he loved even if it meant allowing slavery to continue. The important part of this passage is the fact that Webster and party are referred to as the “Southern Unionists” because they were the ones working to prevent the breakup of the Union over the slavery question. These events happened a full decade before the war, but the tensions that could cause it were already visible.

As noted above, Whitman saw the outbreak of war as a complete shock in that a state would attack the federal government, and this shock translated into a few telling passages in *Specimen Days*. Whitman was content to let the states handle their own problems, but the war radically changed that view, enough to make him a firm believer in the strength of national unity. Whitman writes about this paradigm shift in an unusual way that is difficult to grasp the meaning of: “But what can I say of that prompt and splendid wrestling with secession slavery . . . The volcanic upheaval of the nation, after that firing on the flag at Charleston, proved for certain something which had previously been in great doubt, and at once substantially settles the question of disunion” (706-7). By using the phrase “secession slavery,” Whitman draws attention to the fact that these states are trying to leave the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and their membership in the Union. Whitman does not attempt to define the term “disunion,” but it is clear to him that the states have crossed a line. The states could deal with their own problems, but once they attacked the federal government, Whitman changes his mind because the Union has been threatened, not by the federal government interfering with a state, but by a state interfering with the federal government. Whitman has already stated his belief in the perfection of the system and the freedoms agreed to by all states, so for a single state to try to impose its



will on the Union as a whole is a gross violation of everything Whitman believes in. Suddenly, the federal government interfering becomes a necessity as it is threatened by the states. Because of this threat, Whitman realizes that it is in the states' best interest to keep the federal government alive as it protects the freedoms he loves, and he also acknowledges that regional interests cannot outweigh national interests in this case. Whitman reuses this idea in a later work entitled *Origins of Attempted Secession*, where he explains how he viewed the secession crisis and the outbreak of war, and as he does so manages to define the term "disunion," as well as clarifying what the question was and how it was answered:

As to the inception and direct instigation of the war, in the south itself, I shall not attempt interiors or complications. Behind all, the idea that it was from a resolute and arrogant determination on the part of the extreme slaveholders, the Calhounites, to carry the states rights' portion of the constitutional compact to its farthest verge, and nationalize slavery, or else disrupt the Union, and found a new empire, with slavery for its cornerstone, was and is undoubtedly the true theory. (If successful, this attempt might . . . have destroy'd not only our American republic . . . but for ages at least, the cause of Liberty and Equality everywhere . . .) (997-8)

Whitman does not want to speculate on who was really at fault for the war, but he makes it clear who he holds responsible and what their goals are. The slaveholders wanted to expand slavery throughout the Union or secede to spread it through their own territory, thereby undermining America and the will of other states. Whitman had a problem with states trying to impose their will on other states and the federal government, and he identifies what he believes the outcome will be: the utter dissolution of the Union and the destruction of "Liberty and Equality."

"Disunion" meant that the attempts by the Calhounites to impose their will upon the government was in sharp contrast to the ideals of America, but more than that, any action to undermine American unity falls under that definition. As Whitman lays out these ideas, one phrase sticks out: "the states rights' portion of the constitutional compact." The Calhounites, through

legitimate means afforded to them through the Constitution, were trying to use the system to their advantage to make sure that their way of life was protected from any interference by the federal government. Whitman took these events seriously because they endangered his faith in both the American system of government and American unity. The war answered the question of whether the American system could tolerate these attempts to undermine the will of the people, and Whitman was forced to change his views accordingly as he could no longer back the belief that the states could police themselves.

Whitman wrote extensively about his political beliefs, but he rarely identified his overarching belief, the one idea that kept him optimistic, but in one small section of *Origins of Attempted Secession*, he makes it clear just what has been motivating him and keeping him from losing faith in society. In a brilliant passage, Whitman shares his faith in America as a closing remark to this brief essay about the war:

It is certain to me that the United States, by virtue of that war and its results, and through that and them only, are now ready to enter, and must certainly enter, upon their genuine career in history, as no more torn and divided in their spinal requisites, but a great homogeneous Nation—free states all—a moral and political unity in variety, such as Nature shows in her grandest physical works, and as much greater than any mere work of Nature, as the moral and political, the work of man, his mind, his soul, are, in their loftiest sense, greater than the mere physical. (999)

The war helped to create a more perfect America, both morally and politically, but the fact that it helped set America on the path to a greater destiny, a “genuine career,” is what Whitman wants the reader to take away from the war. Although the words “variety” and “homogeneous” present a seeming contradiction, their use also helps to identify Whitman’s argument. Even though the states have now been united into one great “Nation,” they have not lost their identities, and Whitman is commenting on the fact that even though they have lost a measure of independence in order to strengthen the Union, the variety of people contributes to that strength. The phrase

“genuine career” means that America will deal openly and honestly with its problems and will be a force to be reckoned with because political division has been swept away. This is the central tenet of Whitman’s Unionism and the reason that he did not lose all hope during the war, because he firmly believed that America, despite its problems, had a greater destiny that meant it must survive the war and come out stronger for it.

Whitman’s belief in America was what saved him from total disillusionment with the Civil War. The ideas of National Unity and the greater destiny of America were the central tenets of this faith that helped him to reconcile the violence around him with the causes of the war, which he saw as selfish politicians seeking disunion through the spread of slavery and the violation of the Constitution. Whitman did not always believe in national unity; instead, this belief evolved over time, beginning with the idea that the federal government was an embodiment of the highest ideals based on the ideas of liberty and equality. Despite his belief in the powers of the states, Whitman changed this view when the states tried to impose their will on the federal government in violation of his highest ideals. Whitman firmly believed in America and its system, which he saw as an eternal covenant between the states to safeguard the freedom of its people, and though the path to reach the goal of total unity was a difficult one, he recognized that it was worth the cost to protect the greatest institution ever produced in America.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Walt Whitman was a complex figure and his work is a testament to that fact. *Drum-Taps* manages to perfectly capture the essence of what it was like to be alive during the Civil War, and not just the lives of soldiers, but the lives of civilians. Whitman draws on his own experiences to create subtle portraits of specific moments in time that any audience can easily relate to, even if the readers are removed from this conflict by space or time. “First O Songs For A Prelude” and “The Wound-Dresser” take the reader inside Whitman’s own head as they become witnesses to what he has seen and felt, both in the chaotic weeks following the shelling of Fort Sumter and in the heart-breaking months in a military hospital helping treat the severely wounded. Both of these poems can be tied to specific events in Whitman’s life that he captures for posterity in *Specimen Days*, his autobiography. Whitman manages to capture the intensity of the real experiences in these poems, and the reader is able to feel the same excitement at the dawning of a new age that Whitman feels as he witnesses the soldiers are marching off to war, followed by the sheer horror of what that new age has brought. The reader is left with a sense of patriotic awe at the sheer power of Whitman’s enthusiasm in “First O Songs For A Prelude,” enough so that the lack of reference to the human cost of the war goes unnoticed, just as it did during those chaotic first days. Whitman is able to capture the sheer fervor of this time in such a way that even a modern reader is left with the feeling that the Union must and shall always persevere. This image is strained by the horrific images of maimed and dying soldiers in “The Wound-

Dresser,” even though it is set up as a cautionary tale for the reader that war is not always what it seems. His realistic portrayal of a chaotic hospital scene is enough to leave the reader feeling uncomfortable at the gruesome sight of the dying cavalryman as they can hear his dying breaths, but it also leaves the reader with a sense of profound sadness that these men are dying alone in an unfamiliar place surrounded by strangers. The images from his life that Whitman presents to his reader are deliberate, and through these images he is able to pass on some small part of his actual experience as a civilian. These two poems are central to the idea that Whitman’s belief in American democracy underwent a profound change from unquestioning patriotism to a more pragmatic form of democracy, one that understood the sacrifices that must be made to preserve it without condemning it. Whitman firmly believed in the Union despite knowing that the patriotic zeal exhibited in his early works contributed to so many deaths, but he was able to reconcile this fact with the knowledge that the Union is worthy of so much sacrifice.

Each of Whitman’s poems contain some part of his actual wartime experience, but the poems about the military are the hardest to read, both for their terseness and for their ambiguity. “An Army Corps On The March” is brief and to the point as the title tells the reader exactly what this poem is about, but the way that Whitman characterizes the army informs the reader’s understanding of Whitman’s patriotism. The army is described as a great mass of men and beasts sweeping through hostile territory on their way to a great victory. They are dirty and tired, but they press on, always moving forward in an inexorable march to victory. The army, though its side is never identified, fits the ideal army as described in so many military textbooks of the time—textbooks that were popular enough for Whitman to have likely come across them in some form. Because of this fact, Whitman’s army becomes a stand-in for the Union as a whole as it steadily marches towards victory over the Confederacy. Before the dust settles however,

Whitman writes about another army in “I Saw Old General At Bay.” Like the previous poem, it is short and to the point as it features an army besieged on all sides, trapped in their works by an unseen and unknown enemy as the titular General tries to send volunteer messengers for help. This General and his men have no affiliation as Whitman leaves it up to his reader to determine their fates—all they have to go on is the messengers leaving with no mention of their allegiance or their fates. This ambiguity allows the reader to experience what it would have been like to be trapped in such a situation, plagued by fear and doubt, heightening the tension while highlighting for the reader what these men fighting for their freedom really went through. In the first poem, all Whitman does is make sure the reader understands the ease with which victory will come, but here he makes sure that they are also left with the sense that victory comes at a high price. These two poems reinforce the idea that Whitman became conscious of the values he was promoting, and the incredible cost attached to it.

A vital part of the Civil War experience was what the average civilian lived through as the war touched every part of society. Whitman acknowledges this in several poems, even though most of the civilian poems are really about a personified America overcoming the obstacles set before it. One such poem is entitled “Beat! Beat! Drums!” and it features numerous civilian characters whose lives are interrupted by the coming of war. As Whitman portrays each civilian, he never mentions the possibility that the men the war is taking away will not return—instead he implies that they will all return safely even though they will be profoundly changed. Whitman does not glorify the war in this poem, nor does he make any explicit statements supporting the war, but he does not criticize it. This ambiguity is important, because Whitman’s lack of criticism and implied positive outcome allow the reader to walk away with a largely positive view of the war. This is in direct opposition to “Come Up From The Fields Father,” a

much longer poem about a family dealing with the loss of their only son. In this powerful poem, Whitman begins by presenting the reader with verdant Ohio farmland during harvest, describing it in rich terms and emphasizing how productive it is, and then quickly juxtaposing it with a letter informing the family that their son has been gravely injured. In a stunning twist, Whitman tells the reader that the son has died, only to exhort the mother to live up to her son's example. It is a harsh poem, and one that could easily have been used to cast the war in a negative light, but Whitman chose to emphasize the humanity of this family, and by asking them to live lives worthy of their son's sacrifice Whitman is telling the reader how much he values the soldiers who have died defending the Union that he so loves. This poem reinforces the idea that even though Whitman had every opportunity to criticize the war and the cost attached to it, he valued the Union enough to remind his audience that every war has a cost but sometimes that cost is worth it.

Whitman was a complex person who was not afraid to share his political beliefs both in his autobiography and in his political tracts. Before the war started he was an ardent states rights supporter, believing in a clear separation of power between the states and the federal government. This separation left the states with more power, and if the government intervened in any way, according to Whitman, the Union should be dissolved. This view changed when the Southern states rebelled and attacked the federal government—Whitman could not support an institution that challenged American democracy and everything it stood for. Whitman began championing the idea of the supremacy of the federal government over the states because it was trying to ensure the continuation of the America that he loved. He firmly believed in this cause and did what he could to support it, even going so far as to volunteer in the hospitals that would change him forever. In the hospitals Whitman came face to face with the men he had been urging to

enter the war through his poetry, and he realized the sheer human cost attached to his actions. This sobered him, and Whitman began emphasizing the sacrifices these men made by urging other Americans to live up to their example and to reach the ideal America.

The American Civil War was a brutal period in American history that redefined what it meant to be an American for an entire generation, and its cultural effects are still being felt today. Many poets tried to capture the raw essence of this period, but only Walt Whitman managed to do it in a way that is both easily accessible and emotionally powerful. Just like America, the war radically changed Whitman as a poet, turning him from a jingoistic nationalist who only recognized the outcome of war, to a sympathetic poet who wanted his readers to understand the costs attached to this great undertaking, the costs that he failed to recognize. This change was mitigated by Whitman's service in the hospitals and by his faith in the Union, an important part of his work that must be accounted for in any serious discussion of Whitman. The war was not an easy time for Whitman just as it was not easy for most of the country, but its impact upon his work is immeasurable.



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## VITA

Andrew Percy was born in Madison, WI to Barry and Vicki Percy and is an only child. He moved around before settling in Chattanooga, TN where he attended Chattanooga Central High School, where he became interested in studying literature. After graduation, he attended Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, TN, where he majored in English with a minor in History. As a college student, he received the Agnes Hull Award for Outstanding Student of Literature, as well as worked in the writing center, which motivated him to continue his education and pursue teaching. As a graduate student, he attended the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where he graduated with a degree in literature in August 2013.